A question of balance: Lone parents, childcare and work

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Summary

Introduction

As part of its welfare to work strategy the Government has been concerned to encourage and increase lone parents' participation in the labour market and has set itself the target of an employment rate of 70 per cent for lone parents by 2010. Research findings over the course of the last ten years or so have shown that childcare is an important contributing factor in the labour market behaviour of lone parents.

This report presents findings from qualitative research to increase understanding of lone parents' attitudes towards and experiences of childcare, their decisions about childcare and work, and their views and experiences of recent and imminent policy initiatives and changes.[1] The research was carried out for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of York.

Seventy-eight face-to-face interviews were conducted with lone parents with at least one child aged ten or under in the Spring of 2004. The interviews were used to gather data on experiences and views of childcare and work. Eight focus groups were also held to explore policy ideas around work and childcare. The research included lone parents who were both in and out of paid employment.

Lone parents' views, attitudes and beliefs surrounding work and childcare

In making decisions about whether to work and what type of work to do, lone parents act under a range of influences including their personal orientation towards work, their attitudes towards parental and non-parental childcare, and their views about different types of formal and informal non-parental childcare.

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[1] It should be noted that this report was drafted prior to the Government's childcare strategy announcements in December 2004.

Lone parents' orientations towards work and parental care

'Work orientation' refers to the extent to which a person is disposed to working, and the strength of their motivation to work for whatever reason, while their orientation towards parental childcare refers to their level of attachment to the idea of providing all or most childcare themselves. Lone parents' work orientations could be high for a number of reasons, for example because work formed an important part of how they perceived themselves, because it had a high social value for them, or because they perceived it as part of providing their children with a positive role model. Orientations towards parental childcare reflected lone parents' views about the rights and responsibilities of being a parent, the emotional value of parenting for them, and their ideas about how best to meet the perceived needs of children.

Interaction between work and parental care orientation

Lone parents could be roughly categorised as having either a high or a lower orientation towards work and towards parental childcare. Combining these orientations produced a four-fold typology of lone parents.

- Some parents (Type 1) had a high work orientation and were also strongly disposed to providing parental childcare. They had aspirations to work but also to provide a great deal of parental care. Typically, this caused tensions that had to be resolved. Some parents managed to find jobs that allowed them to fulfil both work and parental aspirations. Others made compromises in relation to work or parental care (or both).

- Type 2 parents had a high work orientation and a lower disposition towards parental care. These parents were disposed to finding work after becoming a parent and did not necessarily want to provide full-time childcare themselves. They experienced fewer tensions about combining work and childcare, and were more likely to be prepared to use non-parental care in order to be able to work.

- Type 3 parents had a lower work orientation and a high disposition towards parental care. These parents typically chose to stay at home to care for their child(ren) and tended to view motherhood as a 'job' in its own right. Having to enter paid work was perceived as something that could impinge upon being a parent, but they might have taken a job if they could still meet their primary desire to care for their child(ren).

- Type 4 parents were identified as having a lower work orientation and a lower disposition towards parental care. These lone parents were not strongly motivated to find a job and although they typically chose to stay at home with their children, this was not necessarily linked to views about non-parental childcare.

Factors shaping work and parental care orientations

Orientations towards work and parental childcare were not necessarily static but could change over time, for example as children got older. Factors that shaped work and parental care orientations fell into two broad categories. First, there were those derived from past and current circumstances, such as the parent's own upbringing, education and work history; as well as children's ages, life stages, and personalities.

Secondly, specific events and developments could have led to changes in a parent's work or parental care orientations at a particular point, such as when they became a parent or become a *lone* parent, through a relationship break-up or the death of a partner.

Work and parental care orientations could also shape and be shaped by beliefs and preferences about various forms of non-parental childcare.

Informal childcare providers were generally perceived as trustworthy and genuinely committed to both the parent and the child. Some lone parents also felt that friends and family members, especially grandparents, were likely to share their values on issues such as how to bring up and discipline children (although it was also notable that some did not feel they shared this sort of understanding with their parents or other informal carers). A feeling that children would be happier or more comfortable in familiar surroundings also tended to lead parents to favour informal over formal provision.

With regard to formal childcare, providers based in or attached to schools and nurseries were typically considered most trustworthy, while the strongest concerns about trust and safety were expressed in relation to childminders. Parents had mixed views about the environments of different settings, and these sometimes influenced their preferences in opposite ways. For example, environments in which childminders provided care were viewed both positively as 'homely' and negatively as too 'closed'; similarly, out-of-school clubs were viewed positively as safe and familiar and negatively because they were too close to the school environment. Opportunities for socialisation and stimulation were valued by parents and tended to lead to a preference for group-based provision (nurseries, out-of-school clubs, and so on).

Though some lone parents valued formal qualifications for childcare staff, others were more concerned that staff had experience of looking after children (particularly as parents themselves). Lone parents also tended to have firm, but differing, views about what types of childcare were appropriate for children at different ages. For example, some saw childminders as appropriate for young children and babies because of the one-to-one care provided, while others said they would not feel confident about leaving a child in an individual's care until he or she was old enough to tell them about what was happening there. Older children were generally thought to benefit from environments that offered opportunities for socialising and stimulation. Past experiences of using or receiving childcare could also influence lone parents' childcare preferences: for example, a positive experience of using a particular provider could lead to a change in perceptions of that type of provision more generally. The media was most likely to have inspired a negative view of childminders.

Lone parents' decisions about work

Coming to a decision about work

Lone parents' decisions about whether to work were typically complex, being the product both of their overall orientations towards work and parental childcare and

of a range of more 'pragmatic' factors, including:

- 'parent-centred' considerations (for example, enjoyment of work and other social and personal needs);
- 'child-centred' factors (for example, benefits of parental care, especially following the break-up of the parents' relationship, or having a working role model);
- issues that affected the whole family (for example, financial needs and benefits).

It was common for lone parents to have made compromises and trade-offs in order to reach a decision. Different lone parents' decisions could take place by means of different decision processes. At one end of the spectrum, some parents, typically those who were highly work-orientated and well-informed, undertook systematic calculations, sometimes with the help of a New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) adviser or family member. For some of these parents, the financial help available through the childcare element of Working Tax Credit was important in making a decision to look for work. Other parents' decision processes were more 'partial' or short-term in nature, for example focusing on some needs and disregarding or postponing others; while a third group of lone parents made decisions about work primarily on the basis of perceived norms derived from family or other social networks.

For a fourth group of parents, the decision to enter work was prompted by a specific event (for example, an offer of work or childcare) or by a situation that acted as a 'gateway' into the labour market. These 'gateways' included study, training and voluntary work, all of which had the capacity to improve a parent's employability and therefore tended to appeal to those who wished to develop a 'career' rather than 'just getting a job'. Voluntary work also seemed to represent a particularly effective 'gateway' for lone parents who had never worked or had taken a long break from the labour market. There were various reasons for this, including the absence of the financial risk involved in coming off benefits and the fact that some voluntary work was available in familiar environments such as schools or childcare settings.

Finding a 'suitable' work-childcare combination

Perceptions about the feasibility of finding a suitable work-childcare combination could have a strong influence both over the initial decision of whether to work, and over the extent to which it was possible to put this decision into practice. Ideally, such a combination would incorporate *both* work and childcare that were available, obtainable, desirable and capable of being coordinated with other aspects of family life.

Decisions about work were influenced by:

- parental employability and the availability of suitable jobs in the local area;
- hours, days and times at which parents were required to work (the desire for part-time working, particularly during school hours, emerged very strongly);

- employers' flexibility (with regard to regular working hours but also more generally, for example, when reacting to unforeseen events such as a child's sickness); and

- location of work (either for transport reasons or because parents wanted to work in the local area for other reasons, such as being close to the child).

In addition to the factors already mentioned, parents also took cost, availability and accessibility into account when assessing the suitability of childcare providers. Some parents felt that the childcare in their area was too expensive, sometimes even with the assistance of the childcare element of Working Tax Credit (WTC). For other parents, the main challenge was finding a childcare place, either because providers were full, or because they needed childcare at non-standard hours or on a flexible basis to fit around their jobs.

Managing the transition into work

The period of transition into work could be a difficult and stressful time for lone parents. For some, it was difficult to know whether to look for a job first and then seek childcare to fit around the job (in terms of hours, cost and/or location, for example), or vice versa. In some cases, this had led to parents having to look for work or childcare under substantial time pressure, which could increase the level of stress associated with making the transition into work. This transition could be made easier if parents were supported to the extent that they were able to secure one thing (either work or childcare) first, and take a reasonable amount of time after that to secure the other.

Parents also described a financial gap that occurred around the time of moving into work, when, having let go of the security of benefits, they then had to wait a period of weeks before receiving either earnings or the WTC. One particular cause of concern for parents was the way that the WTC did not enable them to be around while their child settled in at a childcare setting, before starting work.

It was common for lone parents to seek support from family and friends during the transition into work. Support given ranged from offers of informal care on a short- or longer-term basis, to practical help in seeking jobs and childcare, and emotional support during a demanding time in a lone parent's life. Some parents had also received advice and support from an NDLP adviser, although their experiences varied widely in terms of both content and quality.

Lone parents' experiences of managing paid work, childcare and education

Coordinating work, childcare and education

Lone parents had to deal with the practicalities of coordinating work with childcare and/or education on a daily basis. This included ensuring continuity of care for the children as well as making appropriate arrangements for parents' and children's travel to ensure that everyone arrived at their various destinations on time.

Coordinating work, childcare and education tended to take considerable time and effort, and was rarely a mundane or straightforward aspect of lone parents' lives.

The circumstances under which effective coordination was achieved were highly variable. Lone parents with the most straightforward arrangements tended to transport children to and from their destinations themselves, while those with the most complex arrangements tended to rely on others for support with children's transport, often alongside the provision of wraparound care. Parents commonly used multiple forms of support, sometimes involving a mixture of informal and formal care. Family members sometimes played an important role in transporting children and in providing wraparound care, although non-resident parents (mainly fathers) were rarely described as being involved in either of these activities.

Coordination tended to be made more complex where a parents' working hours were long and/or extended beyond the school day, or where they had long journeys to and from work, school or childcare. In such cases, additional support with children's transport and care was usually required. Sometimes the amount of childcare needed could be as little as 10 minutes, but filling such small gaps was nonetheless vital to ensure children's continuity of care and to enable parents' employment. Journey times to work were commonly less than 30 minutes, and no parent reported a journey of longer than an hour, indicating that the limit for lone parents in terms of feasible coordination of travel to work, childcare and education lies somewhere around this threshold.

Strategies for simplifying the coordination of work, childcare and education

Lone parents were generally highly active in pursuing strategies for effective coordination, which tended to fall into three main categories, which were often used in combination:

- creating proximity between the home, workplace, education and childcare settings;
- reaching negotiated agreements with employers over the number and timing of working hours; and
- reaching negotiated agreements with family and friends for informal childcare and coordination support.

The parents we spoke to had created proximity between key locations in various ways: by choosing childcare that was close to the home and/or school; by moving house to be nearer the workplace and/or school; or by choosing employment local to their home. The desire for proximity between homes and childcare settings confirms the importance of plans to introduce both Children's Centres and Extended Schools in all neighbourhoods.

Those parents who adopted the second strategy tended to seek alterations to their working hours which would allow them to deal with the children's transport needs

themselves and/or to dispense with the need for childcare. The main aim of these strategies was to reduce the 'time costs' associated with travel and work commitments. Time costs were accentuated for lone parents because they were parenting alone, without another parent in the household to help with coordination problems, or to participate in a parental 'shift pattern' of paid work and childcare.

Negotiated agreements in the management of work and childcare

The latter two strategies of negotiating work and care were very closely linked: parents had sought to alter their working hours to fit with their childcare provision and/or vice versa. Where there was inflexibility in either of these, the task of coordination became much more difficult. For some lone parents, this resulted in a decision to change jobs or to give up work or study altogether.

Some lone parents had successfully reached negotiated agreements with employers to alter their working hours, and these were often vital to their coordination strategies, particularly in view of the general inflexibility of childcare provision. However, such agreements were not always satisfactory and had, in some cases, created damaging imbalances in relationships between lone parents and their employers. Some reported, for example, that what they 'paid back' in unpaid overtime far outweighed the time taken off work, while others tended to construe such agreements as 'favours', which could induce feelings of guilt, gratitude or resentment.

Negotiations with informal carers such as grandparents tended to be much more complex and implicit than those with employers, involving varying expectations on all sides. Some parents, for example, expected grandparents to provide childcare as a right, while others expected no help at all, perhaps because the grandparents worked, were ill or frail, or because the lone parents felt it was 'not right' that they should help. Grandparents' expectations also varied according to their capacity and willingness to provide childcare. A wish to 'pay back' informal childcare providers, in cash or kind, was much more strongly associated with friends – and sometimes other relatives – than with grandparents.

Lone parents' policy messages

A range of policy messages emerged both explicitly and implicitly from our discussions with lone parents.

Parents and work

Overall, lone parents' views of the WTC, and particularly the childcare element, were positive. For some parents, particularly those without access to informal childcare provision, it had made the difference between working and not working; crucially, it seemed to have opened up a route for parents to combine paid work and family responsibilities by making it financially viable for them to work part-time.

Some parents thought that the subsidy provided through the childcare element of the WTC should be increased or distributed more 'fairly', perhaps with more of a focus on lone parents and low-income families. Some said it was still difficult to pay for childcare, even though they only had to meet 30 per cent of total costs. It was also observed that the 16-hour threshold did not allow parents to work a very small number of hours (perhaps as part of a gradual entry to work), and could even act as a disincentive to working more hours or seeking promotion within a job.

Some lone parents said that speaking to an NDLP adviser had played a part in their decision to take work. The 'better-off' calculation and provision of information about WTC were considered helpful elements of the service. It was clear that the NDLP worked best when the support offered was collaborative (ideally with both parents and employers), flexible and sensitive to the needs of the individual lone parent. It also needed to be holistic, primarily in terms of taking childcare needs into account, rather than focusing solely on the search for a job (a function which is likely to be assisted by the development of the Childcare Partnership Manager role).

Some lone parents felt that the Government could do more to recognise that some parents genuinely did not wish to work, particularly in the early years of a child's life. It was considered important that the Government was not seen to be pushing parents towards work or implying that they ought to work. Parents also felt that the Government should support parents who chose to stay at home with children, both financially (for example, improving benefits for non-working parents or extending paid maternity leave) and personally (for example, facilitating social interaction between parents to prevent them becoming lonely or isolated).

Childcare

Lone parents had a number of suggestions for ways in which the Government could improve childcare services. These focused on increasing the number of good quality, affordable nurseries for pre-school children; expanding affordable out-of-school and holiday care for school age children; and addressing the problems associated with the inflexibility of all types of formal provision (for example, having to book or pay for a place a long time in advance, or not being able to use providers part-time). Some parents were also concerned with wraparound childcare (for example, between the hours of 8am and 6pm to cover journeys to and from school) and provision at atypical times.

Some lone parents thought that informal carers (family and friends) ought to be eligible for subsidy via the WTC, as this would make them feel more confident about asking for care from these sources and, hence, more likely to take work or increase their working hours. An additional benefit might be to help the carer (for example, by enabling a grandparent to retire). It was noted that some informal carers actually *spent* money in the course of providing childcare (for example, on food or transport).

Employers and the workplace

While lone parents typically acknowledged the constraints within which (particularly small) employers could offer family-friendly support, there were nevertheless a number of ways in which they felt policy could help here. These included encouraging employers to offer part-time (particularly school-hours) work, flexible hours and job shares, and urging them to take a flexible approach with regard to unforeseen events such as a child's sickness. Some parents were positive about the idea of workplace crèches, which they felt would make combining work and care easier, and be attractive to those who were nervous about leaving their children for the first time on (re-)entering work. Lone parents also felt, more generally, that the Government had a responsibility to liaise with employers and persuade them to engage with the particular needs of lone parent families, even where they represented a small minority of staff.

Provision of information

While it was clear that the provision of relevant and high quality information on childcare could influence a parent's attitudes, particularly towards formal provision, lone parents described the provision of childcare information as 'bitty' and 'disjointed', and felt that parents were typically required to take a very proactive approach to finding it. They also felt it was generally difficult to track down the kind of detailed information on childcare providers they needed. A priority for parents was therefore for the Government to provide a single, well-publicised, easily accessible source of childcare information for them to use as and when they needed it.

Although lone parents had received childcare information through a wide variety of channels, the preferred source of information was personal recommendation from other parents. This might point to useful government investment in developing local parent networks alongside other formal sources.

To complement information on childcare, lone parents suggested ways of providing them with advice on (re-)entering work, including a 'bumper pack' of information to be sent annually to lone parents and a freephone advice line advertised on television.

Overall, the key message was that advice and support on work, childcare and other issues ought to be integrated and holistic and sensitive to the needs and desires of the individual parent.

The lone parents typology and policy intervention

Individual lone parents have different combinations of work and parental childcare orientation, and this is likely to determine the kind of intervention that might be more effective, in the first instance, to enable them to take up paid work or to remain in employment. The table below summarises the **minimum** intervention that might enable lone parents to enter and remain in work, according to the four broad types we have identified. However, in interpreting this table, it is important to be aware that government intervention will always operate within certain limitations: whilst it may do much to alter parents' views about work and childcare, it too must be

adaptable and seek to reflect – rather than change – those beliefs and preferences which they hold most deeply.

Table 1   Parent types and priorities for policy intervention

Parent type	Employment intervention	Childcare intervention
Type 1: high work & high parental care orientation	- Flexible working arrangements available in all job types - Control over working hours, including atypical hours - Extended paid maternity or parental leave (e.g. for one year) 'settle in' period	- Better information on childcare services with an emphasis on recommendations from other parents - Childcare 'tasters' - (Financial support for informal carers) - Financial support for childcare during the - Childcare measures targeted at those with older pre-school and school-age children
Type 2: high work & lower parental care orientation	- Level of employment flexibility required largely dependent on flexibility of childcare provision parents need them	- More affordable day care provision - More out-of-school and holiday childcare - Services that are available when lone - Childcare and education settings located in close proximity
Type 3: lower work & high parental care orientation	- Learning opportunities - Voluntary work	- Better information on childcare combined with information on learning and voluntary work opportunities - Childcare 'tasters' provided in combination with short training or advice sessions - Childcare provided with courses and voluntary work-Financial support for childcare during the 'settle in' period - Childcare measures targeted at those with older pre-school and school-age children
Type 4: lower work & parental care orientation	- Learning and voluntary work opportunities, although direct entry into work also an option - Support to deal with the 'financial gap' associated with the transition into work - Strengthen family-friendly legislation	- All measures listed under Type 2 but with more affordable provision /financial help to pay for childcare being particularly important

Conclusion

The study seeks to answer three key research questions:

- What are the factors that underpin parents' views and attitudes towards (parental and non-parental) childcare and work?

- How are lone parents' decisions about childcare (and the perceived choices and constraints) balanced with decisions about work?

- How do lone parents manage or negotiate childcare within working life?

Research question one: attitudes and beliefs about childcare and work

This study has filled a gap in the evidence on lone parents, childcare and work by developing a detailed typology of work and parental care orientation and exploring the various factors that can contribute to these. Understanding the interaction between these two orientations, and how this shapes attitudes towards work, parenting and childcare can be used to inform thinking about appropriate policy interventions for different kinds of lone parent family.

Research question two: work and childcare decisions

This study increases understanding of lone parents' labour market behaviour and childcare arrangements by making a clear analytical distinction between the influences that underpin parents' beliefs and attitudes towards work and childcare, and the more pragmatic factors that shape employment and childcare decisions. Of relevance for policy is the development of 'models' that guide parents' decisions about whether or not to take up paid employment. The study has shown how adequate information, advice and support can help parents move towards a satisfactory balance between their roles as workers and as parents.

The study also looks deeper than previous research into the timing of lone parents' decisions about work and childcare. Our findings show how difficult it can be for parents to synchronise decisions about childcare and work arrangements; a factor which can add to the substantial pressures they already face during the transition to work.

Research question three: managing and negotiating childcare and work

This study builds on a body of evidence regarding lone parents' attempts to balance work and care with an in-depth analysis of how these are coordinated on a daily basis. Locations of work, school and childcare providers, transport and flexibility of both work and childcare emerge as key determinants of effective coordination. Strategies to create proximity between home, work, childcare and education settings exist alongside negotiations with employers regarding working hours, and with family and friends regarding informal childcare arrangements and coordination support. Of relevance to policy is the evidence that coordination difficulties can act as disincentives to work, that the lack of support from the non-resident parent can have large 'time costs' for lone parents, and that changes in employment policies could play a crucial role in supporting parents disadvantaged by having to face problems alone.

1   Introduction

As part of its welfare to work strategy the Government has been concerned to encourage and increase lone parents' participation in the labour market and has set itself the target of an employment rate of 70 per cent for lone parents by 2010. Policy thinking around this objective has been informed by consistent research findings over the course of the last ten years or so, that, among other things, childcare is an important contributing factor in the labour market behaviour of lone parents. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) now wishes to update knowledge about the interaction of childcare and labour market decisions in the light of a number of policy changes, and to inform future policy thinking.

This report presents findings from qualitative research to increase understanding of lone parents' attitudes towards and experiences of childcare, their decisions about childcare and work, and their views and experiences of recent and imminent policy initiatives and changes.[2] The research was carried out in 2004 for DWP by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of York.

This introductory chapter explains the policy background to the research study and sets out a brief review of the current state of knowledge about the labour market participation of lone parents and their use of non-parental childcare (in Sections 1.1 and 1.2). The aims and objectives of the study are in Section 1.3. The design and methods of the study are described in Section 1.4, and Section 1.5 sets out the structure of the rest of the report.

1.1 Policy background

In 1998, a consultation document 'Meeting the Childcare Challenge' (DfEE, 1998) introduced the first *National Childcare Strategy*, its aim being to increase the number of childcare places, to make childcare services more affordable and to raise the quality of provision in order to enable parents, especially lone mothers, to enter

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[2]   It should be noted that this report was drafted prior to the Government's childcare strategy announcements in December 2004.

and remain in paid employment. Another objective was to invest in the health, well-being and education of all children, targeted at those living in deprived areas, so that they are better prepared for school (Land, 2002).

The National Childcare Strategy comprises a range of policy initiatives, including increases in central funding to expand the number of childcare places available; pilot schemes for Early Excellence Centres to test the value of integrated day care, early education and family support services; the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative to provide new affordable childcare places to deprived areas; the New Opportunities Fund from National Lottery money for the expansion of out-of-school clubs; the national Sure Start programme providing services to families with children under four years in deprived neighbourhoods; financial support to parents to pay for childcare (such as the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit, and childcare subsidies provided as part of the New Deal for Lone Parents); the introduction of Childcare Partnership Managers in Jobcentre Plus offices[3]; and the establishment of Children's Centres in deprived areas to house family services, including childcare and early years education, health services, training and parenting support, in a single location.

1.2   Recent research on work and childcare

1.2.1   Use and preferences regarding childcare

Research on childcare has dealt mainly with descriptive analyses of parents', including lone parents', *use* of childcare. However, this can be distinguished from parents' *preferences* for different kinds of childcare, which they might or might not be able to use in practice. Research and policy also distinguishes between *formal* and *informal* childcare. Formal childcare includes registered provision, such as nursery schools and classes, playgroups, day nurseries, childminders, nannies and au pairs, and out-of-school clubs. Informal childcare includes provision by grandparents, other relatives (including siblings), friends and ex-partners. This distinction is important in policy terms because government financial assistance (for example through the WTC) is only available to parents who use registered formal provision.

The main source of childcare for parents (lone mothers and two parent families), particularly for those working part-time, is grandparents though friends and relatives are also widely used (La Valle *et al.*, 2000; Woodland *et al.*, 2002). Among lone parents in a recent study, just under a quarter reported using their ex-partner for childcare, a source used particularly by those in work (Woodland *et al.*, 2002) and lone fathers (Kasparova *et al.*, 2003).

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[3] Childcare Partnership Managers were introduced in 2002 to identify the gaps in local childcare provision, work with local childcare partnerships to influence the growth of childcare, facilitate the flow of up-to-date information about available childcare to Jobcentre Plus, and promote the services and customers of Jobcentre Plus to employers within the childcare sector.

Some research studies have explored parents' preferences for different kinds of childcare over and above data on the providers that they actually use. These have found that informal care is generally favoured over formal for a variety of reasons. It is seen as more flexible than formal childcare, thus matching the demands of the flexible labour market (Land, 2001). Second, informal care, particularly if provided by grandparents, is sometimes considered as the 'next best thing' to parental care. Parents tend to see informal carers as providing a quality of care comparable to their own, with someone whom they can trust, who will show affection to their child and who would bring their children up as they would want to (Arthur *et al.*, 2003; Woodland *et al.*, 2002). Childcare preferences among lone parents are complicated by certain characteristics such as class. For example, there is evidence that working class mothers are deeply distrusting of formal childcare, preferring family care because they consider it best for their children (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Some parents, however, have been found to favour registered formal care because it is seen to give children the opportunity to mix with others, to receive an education and to be looked after by someone who is properly trained. Woodland *et al*. (2002) found that parents who need full-time care were more likely to choose formal provision, often in combination with informal care. The same study found that 66 per cent of lone parents and 60 per cent of couples who ideally wanted to use a formal provider had not done so in the previous year, suggesting that there might be an unmet demand for *formal* childcare among lone parents (Woodland *et al.*, 2002).

Some research suggests that the types of childcare most likely to be preferred by parents largely correspond to the forms of provision that are most commonly available (Ford, 1996), though other work has found that a lack of availability of formal childcare constrains demand (Callendar, 2000), suggesting that an increase in formal care might lead to an increase in its use.

1.2.2 Barriers to using childcare

A major barrier to work for lone mothers in the UK is thought to be a lack of good quality, convenient and affordable childcare. Numerous studies have identified the difficulties that mothers in general (Bryson *et al.*, 1999; Callendar, 2000; Finch and Gloyer, 2000; La Valle *et al.*, 2000; Childcare Commission Report, 2001; Strategy Unit, 2002; Woodland *et al*., 2002), and particularly non-working lone parents (Kasparova *et al.*, 2003), experience in finding childcare. For example, in a recent study, six out of ten unemployed lone parents who were looking for work cited childcare availability and affordability as preventing them from entering full-time work, and half of lone parents reported they had some difficulties paying for childcare (Kasparova *et al.*, 2003). Marsh (2001) also found that a third of out-of-work lone parents said a lack of affordable childcare was a barrier to work.

Other research provides evidence that childcare costs for lone parents are not always the main or sole influence in the decision to work, and lone parents long established in work rarely cite childcare as a major difficulty they had to overcome to enter or remain in paid work (Marsh, 2001). The financial costs and benefits of using childcare, and of entering paid work, can also be considered alongside social norms

and expectations, or what Duncan and Edwards (2002) call 'gendered moral rationalities'. There is evidence that tension between lone parents' dual role of parent and worker can contribute to the decision (not) to work or to delay work, and subsequently to their use of childcare (Duncan and Edwards, 2002).

In surveys of lone parents asking about reasons for not working, issues of childcare affordability are often cited alongside a desire not to spend time away from their children (e.g. Kasparova *et al.*, 2003). Many lone parents choose to stay at home with their children despite the financial advantages that work can offer, either when children are very young or because of the perceived need for parental care, for example, soon after parents have separated or divorced (Marsh, 2001). In one study, 67 percent of lone parents compared with 58 percent of couple families cited this as a reason for not using childcare (Woodland *et al.*, 2002).

Many lone mothers want to look after their children themselves and childcare only becomes an issue once work is considered, not before (Marsh, 2001). Some lone parents do not look for childcare to fit in with their prospective employment; rather they look for jobs with hours that enable them to look after their children themselves (Finlayson *et al.*, 2000). Lone parents who strongly feel that they should care for their children themselves can be positive about employment, but only when it does not interfere with their roles as mothers (Marsh, 2001). Providing affordable childcare does not necessarily lead to increased employment amongst lone parents. Nonetheless, it is still important, and additional provision at the right time can ease the move into work more quickly (Marsh, 2001).

1.2.3   Gaps in knowledge

We still lack a full understanding of how different factors combine together to shape parents' attitudes towards childcare and the direction of any possible 'causal' relationships – for example, whether positive attitudes towards non-parental care *precede* and help to facilitate a return to work, and the extent to which they are a *result* of the return to work and the need to use non-parental care. We also know little about the relative importance different factors have in shaping childcare preferences. For example, we know that the widespread preference for and use of informal care are influenced by perceptions of trust and shared values (see for example, Arthur *et al*., 2003). However, we also know that informal care is often preferred and chosen by parents because, compared with formal provision, it is cheaper (and often free), and is usually more flexible and accessible. What we do not know, however, is the relative importance that these influences have on the childcare preferences of parents in different circumstances.

A further issue that has been little researched is how the 'history' of childcare provision in a local area influences parents' attitudes. A recent study (Harries *et al*., 2004), found that in areas with a long tradition of childcare services, use of formal childcare was 'normalised', in that it was common and generally positively viewed. In areas with little history of formal provision and where progress in expanding childcare services had been slow parents tended to regard formal childcare as either

something for parents who could not cope with their children or for 'well-off' parents.

Although research has addressed the question of parents' choices about childcare, there has been less work on how parents manage those arrangements in practice. Childcare arrangements need to be coordinated with travelling to and from home and different education and care settings. At the same time parents must also manage their own travel to and from the workplace. In some cases, these arrangements can be complex and have been described as 'running around in circles' or 'having to be in a million places at once' (Skinner, 2003). Family, friends, and non-resident parents can all play an important role in lone parents' coordination of different arrangements. The great reliance on social and family networks for childcare provision and for coordinating childcare arrangements raises the question of how lone parents negotiate access to these.

Employers also have a potentially important role for parents in managing childcare and work. Recent research has shown that parents in a weak labour market position (for example, low skilled workers) might be less able than others to secure family-friendly arrangements within their current jobs, or to find jobs that can meet their needs to reconcile parenting responsibilities with work (La Valle *et al*., 2002a). Given the large number of lone parents in low skilled jobs, relations with employers are an important issue to understand for the development of policy.

1.3   Aims of the study

While much is known about lone parents and labour market behaviour, two principal considerations have prompted the need for more work to inform future policy thinking. First, there is a need for greater understanding of the views, attitudes and beliefs of lone parents about childcare and work, and how policy might need to take these into account. Secondly, there is a need for new data on lone parents' use and experience of childcare in the light of recent and imminent policy changes.

The main objectives of the study were, therefore, to explore:

• lone parents' preferences about the use of non-parental childcare and about the use of formal versus informal care;

• how, and to what extent, lone parents' decisions about childcare (and perceived choices and constraints) are balanced with decisions about employment;

• how lone parents manage or negotiate childcare within working life.

More detailed research questions included:

• What have been lone parents' experiences of, and attitudes to, childcare used in the past?

• What are lone parents' motivations for using non-parental childcare (including work-related and child-centred reasons)?

- How do lone parents view the benefits and limitations of informal and formal childcare?
- What are parents' ideal choices of childcare?
- What sorts of flexibility do lone parents need from childcare?
- What sources of information about childcare do lone parents use, and need?
- When do lone parents start looking for childcare (i.e. after getting a job, before, or simultaneously)?
- What are lone parents' views and experiences of current policy ideas for helping them?
- What other policy lessons are there for Government for the provision of formal childcare?

1.4   Design approach and methods

Qualitative research techniques were considered the most appropriate method for exploring lone parents' views, beliefs and experiences of childcare and work.

The research questions set out above suggested that a mix of individual depth interviews and group discussions would be required, since questions about individual beliefs and experiences are best explored in one-to-one interviews, while exploring views about current and future policy is most suited to group discussions where people can respond to the views of others.

The target sample of lone parents for this study included only those with a child of 10 years or younger. It was expected that most lone parents with older children would not need to use forms of formal or informal childcare so often and would experience fewer difficulties balancing work and childcare.

1.4.1   Depth interviews

Seventy-eight interviews were carried out with lone parents in the Spring of 2004. The sampling frame for the depth interviews included lone parents who had taken part in the Family Resources Survey (FRS) between April 2002 and December 2003 and had consented to being contacted again for the purposes of research. Lone parents were initially telephoned and screened to ensure that they were still lone parents and that they still had at least one child of 10 years or younger living with them in their household.

It was clear from the review of research literature outlined above that a wide range of factors could influence lone parents' decisions about childcare and work, and their experiences once in work. The sampling approach for this study was therefore intended to maximise the extent to which such diversity was reflected in our sample.

Two *primary sampling variables* were selected to guide selection:

• employment status and length of time in work;

• geographical area.

The sample was selected to include roughly equal numbers of lone parents who were in paid work and those currently not in paid work. For those in work, the aim was to include parents who had recently entered, or re-entered, the labour market and those who had been in work for a longer period of time. The former group was expected to be able to talk with better recall the early transition period from unemployment to work, while the latter group was expected to contribute experiences of sustaining work and details of how they dealt with any changes in circumstances at home or at work that had impacted on their childcare arrangements.

Four research sites – London, South Wales, the North West and Tyneside – were chosen, within which lone parents were selected from a range of city, urban and rural locations.

In constructing the purposive sample for this study we also aimed for diversity around a number of other criteria. The sample was therefore monitored as respondents were recruited and interviewed to ensure that sufficient diversity and range was achieved. These criteria included:

• patterns of childcare use: we aimed to include lone parents who use non-parental childcare covering informal provision and different types of formal childcare;

• work patterns: including lone parents who worked full-time, those with part-time jobs, and in forms of study;

• age and number of children in the family;

• parental age and gender.

The characteristics of the 78 lone parents in the sample are presented in Table 1.1 according to the primary and other sampling variables.

Table 1.1   Characteristics of sample of lone parents

Characteristic	Number	Notes
Sex		
- women	75	
- men	3	
Age		
- < 30	20	
- 30-39	37	
- 40-49	14	
- not known	7	
Employment status		
- in work full-time (30+ hours a week)	17	Six lone parents were in some form of study
- in work part-time (< 30 hours a week)	26	
- out of work	35	
Number of children		
- 1	35	
- 2	20	
- 3	15	
- 4	8	
Age of youngest child		
- < 3	15	NB 25 lone parents had at least one pre-school age child
- 3-4	10	
- 5-6	24	
- 7-10	26	
- 11-12	3	

Lone parents' experiences of childcare included their current use and their past use (which often included a number of different types of childcare). Nine lone parents in the sample were, at the time of interview, not using any form of non-parental childcare, and nine were using more than one type. Eight lone parents were currently using their ex-partners to provide some or all of their childcare needs. However, current use of childcare did not reflect their overall patterns of use and their wider experience of childcare since many had used various types of provision in the past. For example, many parents who had used nursery provision when their children were very young had changed to a different sort of provision (or no provision) once their child reached school age. Across the sample, therefore, there was a wide range of experience of all the main forms of non-parental childcare, including informal provision from family and friends, nursery provision, childminders, and out-of-school provision.

1.4.2 Group discussions

The aim of the group discussions was principally to consider policy issues around the provision of childcare itself and other forms of support (such as information and financial help) intended to enable lone parents to benefit from childcare opportunities.

Eight group discussions were held: two in London, and one each in Birmingham, Newcastle, Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool and Cardiff. Prospective participants were selected from the same source as that used for the individual interviews (the Family Resources Survey (FRS) 2002-2003), and boosted by samples of lone parents from three further sources, namely (a) the FRS 2001, (b) the FRS 2000 and (c) the Sixth Survey of Parents of Three and Four Year Old Children and Their Use of Early Years Services (2002). The sub-samples were forwarded to a recruitment agency who made personal contact with lone parents. Not all parents were willing or able to attend the group discussion on the chosen date. The recruitment agency therefore used 'snowballing' techniques to ensure that a sufficient number of parents attended each group, according to instructions supplied by the research team to ensure a robust sample. This proved a successful back-up strategy and a total of 69 lone parents, all mothers, eventually attended one of the discussions.

The primary aim was to recruit working lone parents with at least one child aged 10 or under to the groups. Detailed information about their personal and employment characteristics was not collected systematically at the point of recruitment.

1.4.3 Conduct of fieldwork and analysis

The depth interviews were carried out using topic guides. These can be found in the *Appendix*. The fieldwork instruments for the group interviews contained a number of different techniques intended to stimulate discussion of a number of policy areas. These are also in the *Appendix*.

Individual interviews typically lasted an hour to 90 minutes; the group discussions took between 90 minutes and two hours. Interviews and group discussions were tape-recorded with the respondents' agreement and transcribed verbatim.

The qualitative data was analysed using 'Framework', a qualitative analysis method that uses a thematic approach to classify and interpret qualitative research data. It is a systematic and transparent method of analysis that ensures validity and reliability in interpreting findings. The key topics and issues that emerged from the data were identified through familiarisation with transcripts. Following this a framework of key issues was devised. A series of charts or matrices was set up, each one relating to a different key theme. The columns in each chart represented the key sub-themes or topics whilst the rows represented individual respondents. Data from each respondent were then summarised into the appropriate cell. In this way, the data were ordered within an analytical framework that is grounded in respondents' own accounts. This approach allows consistent 'within case' and 'between case' analysis, for example between working and non-working lone parents.

1.5   Structure of the report

The structure of the report has been chosen to address the main research questions underpinning the study. Chapter 2 presents an analysis of lone parents' views, attitudes and beliefs about work and childcare. Two key dimensions, work orientation and orientation towards providing parental childcare, are used to develop a typology of lone parents to increase understanding of the types of issues that lone parents face in making decisions about work and childcare. The chapter goes on to examine lone parents' views about informal and formal childcare, and about different types of formal childcare.

Chapter 3 looks at the factors that influence a lone parent's thinking about whether or not to enter, or re-enter, the labour market, and considers the ways in which decisions about work are reached. We also look at the difference between making a decision about *whether* to work and how that decision is put into effect. Finally, the chapter examines the period of transition into work, and how difficulties, worries or concerns about working are addressed.

Chapter 4 analyses lone parents' experiences of managing work and childcare by exploring how they plan and implement arrangements for working, and for transporting themselves and their children between home, childcare providers, schools and places of employment. The chapter also considers the important issue of how parents manage relationships with employers, for example in negotiating working hours and the need for time off to deal with ad hoc or unforeseen circumstances. Lone parents' management of negotiations with informal and formal childcare providers are similarly explored.

Chapter 5 presents data from lone parents who took part in both interviews and discussion groups about their views and experiences of government policy regarding childcare and work. The chapter covers perceptions, opinions and suggestions around the provision of childcare and policies that can support the use of childcare (such as information and financial support).

Chapter 6 concludes the report by returning to the research questions and summarising what has been learned from this study in the context of existing knowledge. It also includes a discussion of how different types of policy intervention might be required to support lone parent families in different circumstances and with a variety of needs.

2   Lone parents' views, attitudes and beliefs about work and childcare

In making decisions about whether to work and what type of work to do, lone parents act under a range of influences including their personal orientation towards work, their attitudes towards parental and non-parental childcare and their views about different types of formal and informal non-parental childcare. In addition, each of these factors can interact with the others: for example, research has found that work orientation is important not only in terms of the decision to enter or not enter work, but also in relation to childcare preferences (Duncan and Strell, 2004). This chapter investigates lone parents' deeply-held views, attitudes and beliefs about work and childcare. Then, in Chapter 3, we will go on to consider how these factors combine with more pragmatic considerations (relating to cost, availability, and so on) to result in lone parents' decisions about work.

The first section of the chapter focuses on lone parents' beliefs and attitudes towards work and parenting, and how they perceive the interaction of their roles as workers and parents. In Section 2.3, we develop a model incorporating four 'types' of lone parent, based on their combinations of work orientation and orientation towards providing parental care.

In Section 2.4, we develop our discussion of lone parents' work and parental care orientations by exploring the factors that can shape these for different parents.

Finally, in Sections 2.5 and 2.6, we go on to look at lone parents' beliefs and preferences about different types of non-parental care, comparing first 'formal' versus 'informal' care, and then exploring views and preferences towards different types of formal childcare, and the factors that shape these.

2.1   Lone parents' orientations towards work

We use the term 'work orientation' to mean the overall extent to which a person is disposed to working or the strength of their motivation to work, for whatever reason or combination of reasons. (Note again, however, that we will not be dealing with the pragmatic factors that play a part in decisions about work and childcare in

this chapter – financial necessity, for example, or the availability of suitable work and childcare; these will be discussed in Chapter 3). Work orientation can be placed on a continuum, with a 'high' or 'strong' work orientation at one end and a 'lower' or 'weaker' work orientation at the other. It is also fluid and can change over time in response to changes in a person's circumstances or attitudes.

2.1.1   Work orientation and personal identity

The parents who can be described as holding the strongest orientation towards work were those for whom work was important for their identity or for how they viewed themselves within society. For these lone parents, work '*added an extra dimension*' to life – it was about being '*more than just a mum.*' Work fulfilled personal needs and made them '*more of an all round person'*. Work was productive, '*challenging*' and '*mentally stimulating'*, and felt like an '*achievement,*' as if they were actually '*accomplishing something.*' Typically, these parents felt they needed to be something other than '*just*' a parent:

> '*…when you're stuck at home with kids, you're two people – you're mummy when the kids are around and then you can be who you are when you're out. So while I've got my kids I'm mummy, and when I haven't got them I can be J …So I was back to J when I was at work.*'

> (lone mother of 19-year-old, 17-year-old, eight-year-old and seven-year-old, non-worker)

For some lone parents earning money was related to maintaining a '*bit of pride*' or '*self-respect'*. For others, paid work was closely related to removing a stigma attached to being on benefits. These lone parents considered themselves not to be the type that '*asks for handouts.*' Earning your own money was also about what was seen as the intrinsic wrong of '*sitting back and relying on the state*' or '*sponging off the state.*'

For some parents, work was important in relation to their role as provider. Thus, becoming a parent tended to increase work orientation since the income from paid work made them able to have a '*better standard of living*' or '*a better lifestyle*' for their children. For some, it was important to make sure their children got '*the same as the kids over the road.*' For others, the importance of work was closely related to a desire that their children should not have to bear the stigma attached to being on benefits or living on a council estate. Some parents simply considered it their material responsibility to provide for their children:

> '*I didn't think the state should look after my children because the state didn't say, 'Have these children.' I chose to have my children so I chose to make that choice to work.*'

> (lone mother of 14-year-old and 20-month-old, worker)

2.1.2 The social value of work

Some lone parents did not feel that work was a key element of their personal identity but were nevertheless strongly orientated towards it, typically for the benefits they gained from meeting and mixing with other people. For these parents, staying at home to look after the children was perceived as *'boring'*, *'at home all day and do[ing] nothing'* or *'staring at four walls*.' The advantages of work included gaining *'independence'*, *'confidence'* and *'self-esteem'*, and, for some, work was *'fun'*. Work provided '*a break'* from the children whilst also being able to have some '*adult conversation*.' It was a place for mixing with other adults, and, for some, for forming friendships. Work for these parents was a means to prevent, or to combat, social isolation.

2.1.3 The value of 'worker' as a role model for children

For some parents, paid work was important in order to provide '*a good role model'* for their children. These lone parents talked about instilling '*social responsibility'* in their children and teaching them *'rights and wrongs'* through the example of paid work. For some, it was also important that their children recognised them as being something more than '*just*' a parent. These lone parents spoke about wanting their children to be '*proud*' of them because they were working and *'serving a purpose'* rather than just looking after them. Thus, working made them change their view of themselves as a parent:

> *'I feel [child] respects me more as a working parent. I don't mean I wasn't a good mum before I was working, but it gives them values in life that I'm trying my best to work and to get my career.'*

(lone mother of nine-year-old, non-worker doing some voluntary work)

Some parents also believed that working (and hence, not providing full-time parental childcare) enabled their children to become more *'independent'* and *'self-reliant.'* Some talked about the happiness they had experienced as a result of undertaking paid work as reflecting positively on their children – *'if you're happy, the kids are going to be happy.'* For some, paid work had also meant that they enjoyed the time they spent with their children more and were less inclined to be '*impatient and ratty*' with them as a result of feeling frustrated or of spending all their time together. Some said that work enabled them to have more *'quality time'* with their children. By spending time apart they made the most of the time they had together.

2.2 Lone parents' orientations towards parental childcare

A parent's disposition towards providing parental childcare lies on a different continuum to their work orientation, with a 'high' or 'strong' orientation towards parental care at one end and a 'lower' or 'weaker' orientation towards parental care at the other. Parents with a high orientation towards parental childcare feel that that they should, and want to, provide childcare themselves (those with the strongest

parental care orientation preferring to do so full-time). Parents with a lower orientation are happier with the idea that they do not provide full-time childcare themselves. As with work orientation, an individual lone parent's orientation towards parental care might be placed at any point along this continuum.

2.2.1   Parental childcare as rights and responsibilities

For some lone parents, orientation towards parental childcare was embedded within concepts of rights and responsibilities. On the one hand, it was considered '*every mother's right to be there*' to raise her child. On the other hand, lone parents considered it theirs, and nobody else's, *'duty'*, or *'responsibility'*, to care for their children. For those that held this view, parental childcare was typically rooted within norms of what it meant to them to be a *'good'* parent. One mother we spoke to even went so far as to characterise non-parental childcare as mainly for *'ineffectual'* parents. Where parental childcare was perceived as the norm, going against this could mean risking stigmatisation for being a *'bad'* mother:

> '*I was hearing mothers talking about…I don't think I'll go back to work until my child is going to school…And they're like…making me out to be a terrible mother that I'm going back to work when she's seven month…I thought, well that's for you but for me I'm going back a bit sooner.'*

(lone mother of 14-year-old and 20-month-old, worker)

For some lone parents, parental care was embedded within feelings of '*independence*' and proving to others that they were capable of bringing up their child by themselves; something which could be especially important to them because they were a lone parent. These parents were determined not to *'dump them on other people,'* especially family and friends, and some had concerns that others, especially family members, might perceive them as incapable or dependent if they opted to use non-parental childcare.

2.2.2   The emotional value of parental childcare

For lone parents, emotional attachment was typically an important factor in shaping orientation towards parental care. These lone parents wanted to see their children *'grow up'* and not *'miss out'* on their child's development and experiences, such as their first smile, first crawl, or first tooth. One lone parent who worked as a childminder spoke of seeing other parents *'heartbroken'* when they had missed such important developments while the child had been in her care. Parents felt it was important to *'enjoy'* their children, to develop a *'bond'* with them, and some expressed a *'need to be there*' for the child, especially when very young. Emotional attachment continued to influence some parents' thinking about work as their children grew older, in some cases beyond the point at which they started school, when it was sometimes felt very important that the parent was able to take them to school, pick them up, do homework with them and *'be there for them'* if they were ill or had a bad day.

There was some evidence that being a lone parent could accentuate the importance of emotional factors in thinking about work, owing to the belief that children '*need you more*' when you are the only present or involved parent in their lives.

2.2.3   Parental childcare as meeting children's needs

For some lone parents, an orientation towards providing parental care was related to the child's perceived *'need'* to be looked after by their parent. Sometimes, this was associated with a child's unhappiness about being left with other people, which, in turn, was sometimes perceived to be linked to the trauma of the parents' relationship break-up. In other cases, the belief that the child *'needed'* parental care was linked to the parent's lack of trust for non-parental providers, or a feeling that others would bring them up in a way that was unacceptable. For some parents, leaving their child – even with family members - was unthinkable.

Some parents believed that parental childcare played an important role in a child's development during their formative years. Lone parents mainly focused on the *'security'*, *'stability'* and *'confidence'* that parental care can develop in a child, especially after a relationship break-up. These parents felt that a lack of parental care could lead to a downturn in the child's behaviour as a result of the perception that no one '*cared*' for them anymore.

2.2.4   The value of non-parental childcare

Some parents in our study, however, held a 'lower' orientation towards parental childcare. Some of these parents felt it was important for them to be able to have a *'break'* or time for themselves away from the children, while emphasis was also placed on the need for children to have '*time out*' from their parents (as we have already mentioned, this need could also influence a parent's orientation towards work). Some felt that allowing both child and parent to have their own space enabled the child to '*mix with others*' and the parent to have a *'healthier'* relationship with them.

Parents perceived non-parental childcare as having a range of potential benefits. Some associated it with children developing social skills or independence, or as having positive implications for their general well-being. Some even believed that parental care could have a negative effect on the child's personality, leading to a *'selfish and spoilt,' 'clingy'* or dependent child. Others were concerned that their children might *'miss out'* if they were cared for at home because they believed that children who had time away from their parents '*have different qualities and abilities that they wouldn't have learnt maybe at home*.'

2.3   The interaction between work and parental childcare orientation

To understand how orientation towards parental care interacts with work orientation, we have developed a model of four broad 'types' of lone parents. The figure below

shows where each type lies in a matrix where the work orientation continuum runs vertically and the continuum of parental care orientation runs horizontally:

Figure 2.1   Typology of lone parents' work/parental care orientations

High work orientation

Type 2	Type 1
Lower parental	High parental
care orientation	care orientation
Type 3	Type 4

Lower work orientation
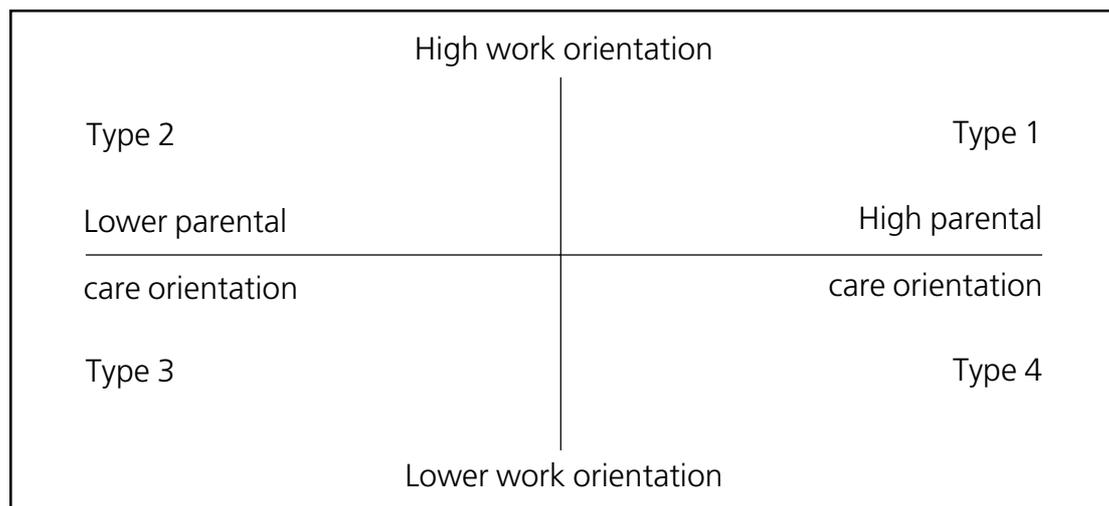
Orientations towards both work and parental childcare are dynamic rather than static. In the next section, we will go on to discuss some of the ways in which the work and parental care orientations of the lone parents we spoke to had changed over time. First, we shall briefly describe a 'typical' lone parent for each of the four types.

2.3.1   Type 1: High work and high parental care orientation

Type 1 parents had a high work orientation and were also strongly disposed to providing parental childcare.

These lone parents stood out clearly from the rest in our study, having aspirations to work and also to provide a great deal of parental care. Typically, this caused tensions that had to be resolved, and parents had found several different ways of doing this. These included:

• the parent made a work-related compromise in order to provide parental childcare. This could mean, for example, deciding to put work on hold for a period, or working fewer hours than they would ideally have wanted to (for reasons of money, enjoyment, or career advancement, for example);

• the parent provided less parental care than they would have ideally liked to in order to work (or to work a greater number of hours);

• the parent managed to find a job that allowed them to fulfil their aspirations in relation to both work and parental childcare (for example, one with fewer hours but good career prospects, or by taking a job within school hours only).

2.3.2   Type 2: High work and lower parental care orientation

Type 2 parents had a high work orientation and a lower disposition towards parental care.

These parents were disposed to entering or re-entering work after becoming a parent. They definitely wanted to work and did not necessarily want to provide full-time childcare themselves. They therefore experienced fewer tensions about combining work and childcare, and were more likely to be prepared to use non-parental care in order to be able to work.

2.3.3   Type 3: Lower work and high parental care orientation

Type 3 parents had a lower work orientation and a high disposition towards parental care.

These parents typically chose to stay at home to care for the child themselves and tended to view motherhood as a *'job'* in its own right: *'I'm their mum, it's my job, it's my duty. It's what I want, it's what I live for.'* Thus, for these lone parents, having to enter paid work was perceived as something that would impinge upon this '*job*' as a parent. Undertaking paid work would mean '*missing out*' on their children growing up, and these parents tended to view themselves as *'giving...the best time of their life to look after their kids.'* One parent even suggested that mothers should be paid to stay at home to carry out this *'job'*. Some of these parents also viewed it as detrimental to their children if they worked:

> *'Because the best way of being a parent is not just bringing income into the home, it's being taking care of your child the best they should be taken care of…there's single mothers that work, but I would say they don't know the mental effect it's doing onto their child. You could get money but you could never…replace the love for your child with anything.'*

> (lone mother of five-year-old, non-worker)

Lone parents in this group experienced fewer tensions than Type 1 parents in terms of reconciling paid work and parental childcare. They did not tend to see work as important for their identity, although some said they might take a job (typically for social or financial reasons) if it did not impinge on their primary desire to care for their child.

2.3.4   Type 4: Lower work and lower parental care orientation

Type 4 parents are defined as having a lower work orientation and a lower disposition towards parental care.

These lone parents were not strongly motivated to find a job and typically chose to stay at home with their children, but not necessarily because they held the view that they should provide full-time care for their children themselves. Indeed, some placed value on non-parental childcare, for example, for the opportunities it could yield for socialising their child, and for mixing with other children. Therefore, while they

tended to provide a great deal of childcare themselves, this tended to be more reflective of their lower work orientation than of any principled commitment to the importance of parental care.

2.4   Factors that shape work and parental childcare orientations

A person has both a work orientation and a parental care orientation prior to becoming a parent or a lone parent. Moreover, neither type of orientation is static: rather, they tend to change over time for a number of reasons. The factors that shape lone parents' work and parental care orientations fall into two broad categories. First, there are those that relate to past and current circumstances, which are likely to shape orientations gradually over a period of time. Secondly, a range of specific events and developments may result in a change to a parent's work or parental care orientation at a particular point in time.

Among the parents we spoke to, the first category of 'circumstantial factors' included:

• parent's own upbringing;

• parent's educational background;

• parent's work history;

• child's age and life stage;

• child's personality and characteristics.

Specific events and developments included:

• becoming a parent;

• becoming a lone parent through a relationship break-up or the death of a partner.

We discuss these in turn below. It is also important to note, however, that factors which can be classified as more 'pragmatic' (for example, financial factors and those relating to the availability of work and childcare) are also heavily influential on work and parental care orientations. We will deal with these in Chapter 3.

2.4.1   Past and current circumstances

Parent's own upbringing

Some lone parents identified their own upbringing as having been important in shaping their work orientation and/or orientation towards providing parental childcare.

One group of lone parents felt they had been set a good example by their own families, which they had attempted to follow. Some thought, for example, that being brought up by working parents, especially working mothers, had played a role

in shaping their high work orientations. For others, an upbringing characterised by parental care – usually by the mother – had shaped their own strong orientation towards parental childcare. Some lone parents described how they had been '*brought up*' to look after their children themselves, and that this attitude had been passed down the generations. One Type 1 mother identified both parents as having been influential upon both her high work orientation and her high orientation towards providing non-parental childcare: her mother provided parental care until she reached the age of six and her self-employed father was strongly motivated towards work. The tension between the two orientations was resolved by her choice to work as a childminder.

However, some lone parents' upbringings had inspired them to do things differently. For example, one parent recalled having been unwilling to leave her mother on the first day of school, which she saw as the result of having been cared for primarily by her until that point. This memory had weakened her own orientation towards providing parental childcare, as she was concerned that a similar situation should not re-occur for her own child. In contrast, another lone parent referred to an '*unsettled*' childhood (**not** characterised by parental care) as an explanation for preferring parental childcare for her own children.

Parent's educational background

Educational background may serve to strengthen or weaken a lone parent's orientation towards work. Type 1 lone parents (high work orientation and high parental care orientation) had higher qualifications than Type 3 and 4 parents but generally tended to have lower level qualifications than Type 2 parents. They tended to leave school at 16 with some qualifications, and some undertook further vocational training courses, such as NVQs. Some Type 1 lone parents had high work aspirations when leaving school, although these were often not fulfilled due to type or level of qualifications. Within this group, those who thought working was an important part of providing a good role model for their child tended to have higher qualifications and greater career-related aspirations.

Type 2 lone parents (high work orientation, lower parental care orientation) had often stayed in full-time education longer than their Type 1 counterparts, and had obtained higher qualifications than all the other groups of lone parents – either leaving school at the age of 16 with a relatively high number of qualifications or staying on beyond compulsory education, with some achieving qualifications at degree level or above. Some Type 2 parents had work aspirations at the time of leaving school, although some did not fulfil these until later life and others did not pursue their plans at all, usually as a result of external influences such as career advice.

Type 3 lone parents with a lower work orientation but high orientation towards parental childcare had generally left school at age 16 or earlier with few or no qualifications. Some had tried to do courses later on in their life but most had not completed them.

Type 4 lone parents were the least qualified of the sample. They had usually left school before age 16, with some highlighting a lack of enjoyment of school. Whilst some had undertaken further courses, they did not tend to have completed them. Although some did recall having had work aspirations on leaving school, they tended to be unclear about what they were or why they had not pursued them further.

While these findings would suggest an association between high levels of education and strong work orientation, the causal direction of this relationship is not known, i.e. whether a disposition towards work led to educational attainment or whether a strong work orientation was formed as a result of the level of education and qualifications that parents had achieved. In addition, a high work orientation was not exclusively associated with educational achievement: some lone parents without qualifications were also highly orientated towards work.

The evidence that Type 2 parents were the most qualified of our sample, and Type 3 parents held few or no qualifications, could indicate a negative relationship between educational achievement and orientation towards parental care. Again, this relationship may run in two directions. It could be that well-qualified parents became less orientated towards parental care as a result of the employment opportunities open to them, or it might be the case that the sorts of parents who are likely to have a strong preference for parental care are less likely to achieve in education (for example, because they see it as the 'norm' to stay at home and bring up children and are therefore less motivated towards work and education from the outset). There was some evidence for all these scenarios among the parents we spoke to.

Parent's work history

Our study suggests a connection between work history and lone parents' work and parental care orientations but, as with educational background, it is difficult to determine the direction of the causal relationships involved.

Type 1 lone parents with a high work orientation and high parental care orientation generally tended to have worked continuously since leaving school in a variety of unskilled or semi-skilled full-time jobs. However, because of their high parental care orientation, some of these parents had found themselves faced with an employment dilemma upon having a child. For some, the birth of a child had prompted a reduction in working hours, whilst for others it had meant stopping work, at least temporarily. Some Type 1 parents had continued in full-time employment, however, suggesting that a high orientation towards work can take precedence over a strong inclination to provide parental care.

Overall, Type 2 lone parents were most likely to be strongly career-oriented, with some careers built steadily since leaving full-time education, and others embarked upon at a later stage, for example after the birth of a first child. Most but not all Type 2 parents had taken relatively short breaks from work when their children were born.

Type 3 lone parents with lower work orientations but high orientations towards parental childcare were not typically strongly concerned with building a career. Moreover, the jobs that these women undertook were generally in the female-orientated service industry – as dinner ladies, cleaners and caterers, for example.

The impression to emerge from the data on Type 4 lone parents' work histories was rather more sketchy than for the other groups. However, these parents tended to be out of work more often than in work, and those that had worked had typically undertaken unskilled jobs.

Child's age and life stage

For the lone parents we spoke to, orientation towards parental childcare was typically dependent on the age of the child. Some parents felt that young children (typically those aged under three) were considered to need more emotional support and *'attention'*, to *'need their mum,'* or simply be *'far too small to go to pre-school.'* Some lone parents therefore considered it very important to stay at home during these early years:

> *'I think they're the most important years there is and you basically, how, how you bring your kids up, up to the age of about five, that's your make or break isn't it.'*

> (lone mother of nine-year-old, six-year-old and five-year-old, worker).

For some parents, starting school represented a particularly significant juncture, when it was thought that children would and should become more *'independent,'* less *'clingy'*, and also better able to inform their parents if anything was wrong at school or in an out-of-school childcare setting. This finding is supported by Woodland *et al.* (2003), who also found that non-working lone mothers with younger children were more likely than those with older children to cite wanting to stay at home with their children as a reason for not working. We will discuss the importance of a child's life-stage with respect to decisions about working in more detail in Chapter 3.

Child's characteristics and personality

Whether or not parents' work and parental care orientations depended on the age of the child, the idea of waiting until they felt that their child was '*ready*' to be left with someone else was a key concern for some parents. In some cases this was linked to the child's personality or characteristics and so orientation towards work and parental childcare could change from one child to the next within the same family. Parents with a child perceived as being particularly '*hard work*' or *'clingy'* sometimes felt that they had a responsibility to spend more time with them or stay at home with them for longer; conversely, these characteristics sometimes led them towards using non-parental childcare at a younger age, either for the child's benefit (for example, for stimulation and socialisation) or for their own (to '*work to get away from him'*), or both.

2.4.2   Specific events and developments

For some parents, the events of becoming a parent and becoming a lone parent occurred simultaneously, while for others they were separated in time. Whichever was the case, both events were likely to have shaped lone parents' work and parental care orientations.

Becoming a parent

In some cases, becoming a parent had shaped work orientations by causing them to think about the potential benefits of working for their children as well as themselves. In such cases, the tendency was for work orientation to be strengthened. Some lone parents talked about how having a child had given them a sense of '*responsibility*', although the meaning of this term was different for different parents. For some parents, particularly those who were strongly work-orientated or whose work orientation was strengthened by having a child, '*responsibility*' could mean providing for the material needs of their children. For others, '*responsibility*' could have a different meaning, for example, as we have already discussed, it was associated with providing an example or '*role model*' for a child.

For some lone parents, becoming a parent caused a temporary decrease in work orientation, causing them to postpone their work-related plans and aspirations, to put them on the *'backburner*' while their focus shifted to providing parental childcare, at least during the first year or few years of the child's life. Not all of these parents rejected the idea of entering or re-entering work altogether however, and some fully intended to do so.

Becoming a lone parent

Becoming a lone parent brought with it a change in role for some parents, which, in turn, could lead to a change in work and/or parental care orientation. This was commonly described with reference to the norm of the traditional male breadwinner family. Some lone mothers considered themselves to have taken on the dual role of both *'a mother and a father,'* or even a triple role – *'housewife, mother and breadwinner'*, and identified this as having made them more focused on going to work. In the same way, some lone fathers recognised that becoming a lone parent meant developing a stronger orientation towards providing parental care than they would have had if in a couple. A few lone mothers were anxious about acting against traditional norms where the mother's duty was to undertake parental care, but felt they had no choice but to go to work, usually for pragmatic reasons such as financial necessity. Others, in contrast, described themselves as *'feminist'* or '*independent*' women as a result of taking on both roles.

Some lone parents perceived there to be a 'double stigma' specifically associated with being a non-working lone parent - first, for being a lone parent and, second, for being on benefits. This therefore increased their orientation toward work:

> *'They look at me and think: 'ooh, she's a single mum, drinking away our taxes''*

> (lone mother of four-year-old, worker)

For some lone parents who had been through the break-up of a relationship with a partner, the effect of the break-up on the child had been an important factor in shaping their work orientation and orientation towards providing parental care. In some cases, parental care orientation had been strengthened by a feeling that the child has undergone a traumatic experience, and that there was therefore a greater need or desire to have the parent there. These findings are supported by previous research which has shown, for example, that nearly all couples argue during the year before separation, for nearly four in ten these arguments are physical, and more than a quarter of the women who become lone parents report physical injury (Ford, 1996). However, these findings also need to be kept in perspective: taking the lone mother population as a whole, there is evidence that those who are not working are actually less likely than mothers in couples to be doing so because they felt that their child would suffer if they went to work (Woodland et al, 2003).

Becoming a lone parent also seemed to have a significant effect on both work and parental care orientations when it also involved becoming a widow or widower. Lone parents who had experienced the death of a partner talked about '*owing*' something to their late spouses in terms of caring for the children. For one parent, this meant looking after the children himself, feeling he was *'doing justice to his wife'* by doing so, although this was placed alongside the belief that it was the role of one parent to look after the children (which, once his wife was no longer there, automatically made it his role). He put this belief into practice by changing his career from a solicitor to a childminder, which fitted in with the children and also, in his opinion, had the added benefit of providing a male role model for the children of lone mothers for whom he provided care.

For one lone mother, however, the death of her husband had strengthened her work orientation: it was emotionally important to carry on his business after his death, whereas before his death she had not worked since her children were born. Nevertheless, she, like the lone father described above, had also become more determined to look after the children herself when there was only one parent around for them. Thus, for both parents, parental childcare and work orientations were influenced, or accentuated, by the death of their partner, and this, in turn, had led to a change in the parent's role within the family.

2.5 Non-parental childcare: beliefs and preferences about informal and formal childcare

Work and parental care orientations can also shape and be shaped by beliefs and preferences about various forms of non-parental childcare. With this in mind, we now turn to lone parents' beliefs and preferences about non-parental care, exploring, first, lone parents' perceptions of informal compared with formal non-parental childcare, and then moving on to discuss preferences towards different formal provider types.

2.5.1   Lone parents' perceptions of formal and informal non-parental childcare

In thinking about policy, childcare provision is commonly categorised under the headings 'formal' and 'informal'. 'Formal' childcare includes registered provision such as nursery schools and classes, playgroups, day nurseries, childminders and out-of-school clubs, as well as non-registered carers such as nannies and au pairs. 'Informal' care includes provision by grandparents, other relatives (including siblings), friends and ex-partners. It is important to note, however, that lone parents themselves very rarely talked about childcare as 'formal' or 'informal'. It was common for them to distinguish between people they knew and other providers, and to talk about formal childcare in terms of specific provider types (nurseries, childminders, and so on) rather than under a single heading.

Trust and commitment

The main division between different childcare providers discussed by lone parents was between people they knew versus '*strangers*', which often mirrored a division between those they '*trusted*' and those they did not. Indeed, this was typically the overriding factor in some lone parents' preference for informal care. From this stemmed the separation of childcare by family and friends from all kinds of formal childcare. It is also important to note, however, that while some lone parents did talk about family and friends interchangeably, others expressed very different views about each. For example, while family members were typically seen as reliable, trustworthy and possessing similar values to parents with regard to bringing up children, not all friends were seen as being so reliable or sharing parents' values to the same extent.

Issues of trust and familiarity were entrenched within some lone parents' preferences for informal over formal childcare. Parents feared how other people would treat their children, focusing on possibilities for physical, sexual, and emotional abuse *'behind closed doors'*. There was a sense that even if more formal facilities became available, some parents would not (want to) use them owing to concerns about trust and safety. Some parents were particularly unwilling to leave their children with '*strangers*' during the evening or at night. It was not clear from our data however, to what extent this reticence was rooted in concerns about safety, or in other factors, such as feeling that care should be provided within the home at such times.

Some parents also had a sense of injustice or considered it illogical that the Government was prepared to support parents financially to leave their child with a '*stranger*' but were not prepared to do the same for family, who were more trustworthy and would do effectively the same, or better job. We will consider the issue of whether informal childcare providers should be subsidised by the Government further in Chapters 5 and 6.

Another important factor influencing preference for informal childcare was the issue of commitment. For some, the fact that family members and friends were willing to undertake childcare '*out of the kindness of their hearts'* was enough to

sway them towards using these providers over other types of childcare. But, for other parents, the feeling that family would *'stick by you,'* were committed to looking after the child, would *'rally round,'* and might actively **want** to look after the children acted in favour of informal childcare. It meant that family support could always be relied upon, even at short notice, and as a result some lone parents automatically asked family to look after their child without considering other options.

A further factor that led some lone parents to a preference for informal care, particularly from grandparents, was a feeling that it was important that anyone looking after their child also had experience themselves of being a parent. (We shall see in Section 2.6.1 that this consideration also influenced lone parents' views about different types of formal childcare.)

Some lone parents, however, did not have a preference for informal childcare. Some of these felt that family undertook childcare out of a sense of obligation rather than because they wanted to, and that this could impinge upon the level and quality of care given. Others felt that that they would be *'putting on'* friends and family by asking them to provide regular childcare, and would only use them in an emergency. Some parents described feelings of *'guilt'* about relying on their own parents, feeling it was not grandparents' responsibility to undertake childcare, as they should have a different kind of relationship with their grandchildren. In other cases, grandparents were considered too old or ill to undertake childcare, while others felt it was simply not their role: *'they brought us up, why should they bring mine up?'*.

Shared understanding

Alongside issues of trust and safety, parents were concerned with the ways in which childcare providers might bring their children up, the methods they might use to discipline them and the kinds of values that they would instil. Parents valued a shared understanding on these issues, which they generally associated most with family and friends rather than formal providers. However, not all family and friends were automatically trusted to bring the child up as the parent wished. While some parents favoured certain family members or friends for cultural or religious reasons, others felt that grandmothers would have very similar ideas to the lone parent about how to discipline and bring up a child:

> *'…and [she] bring[s] them [the children] up the way I want her to and…they get 80 percent or 90 percent of the same treatment as they would with me…'*

> (lone mother of twins aged nine, worker)

Not all lone parents, however, were quite so positive about grandparents as childcare providers. Some parents expressed negative views about the child's grandparents providing care, perhaps because they had different values, different parenting styles, had not brought them up very well when they were children or would be inclined to *'interfere'*. Also, some parents thought that family members in general – and grandparents in particular – would be unable to provide a child with

the same level of stimulation and the same sorts of activities that formal care could provide; this was perceived to lead to children being bored or unhappy. A further disadvantage of informal care for some lone parents was the lack of opportunity for social interaction with other children, which was considered to be a major benefit of specific types of formal childcare (primarily group-based provision). Socialisation was often seen as particularly important for younger children (as opposed to babies, or older children, who would get such opportunities at school).

Children's happiness

Lone parents frequently talked about their children's '*happiness*' and about '*wanting them to be happy*'. Children's happiness was key to many lone parent's preferences regarding non-parental childcare. For example, the belief that children were happier and felt more comfortable in familiar surroundings tended to lead parents to favour informal over formal provision. Some felt that friends and family, especially ex-partners, had affection for or '*loved*' their children, and thus would give them special attention compared with formal providers. These parents expressed the view that their children would be '*safe and cared for completely*' with these providers. For a few lone parents, an ex-partner's close relationship with their child pre-break-up meant it was important for the child that the ex-partner had an input in the child's upbringing and care.

Children's happiness was not linked solely with informal childcare, however. Some lone parents saw types of formal provision (such as out-of-school clubs) as making their children happy, for example by allowing them to mix and play with a group of friends.

2.5.2   Non-parental childcare: lone parents' preferences for different types of formal childcare

This section aims to investigate the key factors according to which lone parents formed preferences for one type of formal childcare over another.

Trust and safety

As with preferences for informal or formal childcare in general, trust and safety were major influences upon lone parents' thinking about different formal provider types. In general, providers that were attached to, based in or similar to schools were considered most trustworthy. Thus, out-of-school clubs were considered trustworthy because they were run by teachers and parents known to lone parents and their children in a familiar and safe environment, usually a school setting. Parents' high levels of trust in childcare provided in a school setting also extended to nursery classes and nursery schools attached to schools.

In contrast, it was common for parents to have concerns about the extent to which they could trust childminders, which were often linked to the fact that there was only one adult involved and the care took place in a '*closed*' environment. This concern was not extended to nurseries to the same degree, since members of staff

could check to see whether their colleagues were *'stepping over the line'*. Some of the strongest negative views around trust related to childminders, leading some lone parents to state a preference for other forms of non-parental childcare. In the depth interviews, lone parents were asked directly whether there were any forms of childcare that they would avoid, and childminders were mentioned here more often than any other kind of childcare. Moreover, some of the lone parents in the study who worked as childminders said that their users' concerns over trust and safety resonated with their own preference for caring for their child themselves, which had led them to choose childminding as a profession in the first place.

Interest in the child

We mentioned in the previous section how important it was to parents that their childcare providers had a genuine interest in and commitment to their child (and, for some providers, to children in general). For some parents, this was a source of concern about using a childminder, with some feeling that they would in fact provide too little *'one-to-one'* care. These parents felt that childminders were liable to have little interest in their children and give them too little attention, choosing to *'do the housework'* or *'sit round and gossip'.* Some parents also expressed the view that some childminders were *'just doing it for the money.'* It is worth noting, however, that some parents also criticised nurseries similarly, reporting that staff were *'not bothering with the children'*.

Environment and atmosphere

Lone parents' views about the environments provided by different formal providers varied widely. Some thought that a childminder could provide a *'homely'* environment and the kind of *'one-to-one'* attention that younger children, especially babies, needed (for this reason, a high staff-child ratio was generally considered positive with regard to nurseries). However, others characterised childminders' homes as *'closed environments'* or viewed them negatively due to a lack of opportunity for mixing with other children. Similarly, while some lone parents had chosen particular childminders because they shared their approach to disciplining children or had similar routines to their own, others were concerned that the close attention given to children by childminders would result in their child being brought up by the childminders *'in their way,'* and perhaps a *'wrong'* way in the eyes of the parent. This was often related to the level of discipline or the kind of manners that would be instilled, but there was also concern about the appropriate level of care provided, for example in relation to willingness to change soiled nappies. These views had sometimes been shaped by past negative experiences of childminders, or by the experiences of friends, acquaintances or other parents portrayed in the media.

For some lone parents, out-of-school clubs were considered an '*extension of school*' and, while this could have positive connotations in terms of trust and safety, it also had negative implications for some parents, who felt that out-of-school care made the '*day too long*' for the child, especially when it involved staying on in the same location and environment. Some parents held similar views about day nurseries.

Socialisation and stimulation

An important factor in favour of nurseries, playgroups and crèches was regarded to be the social skills that children developed by attending them (though this advantage was referred to mainly in relation to younger children rather than babies). Thus a combination of parental and formal care was often used by parents as a way for their children to mix with other children and adults, which was something their child might have missed out on by being at home with one parent all day. This was considered especially important for an only child, and for younger children whose older brothers and sisters had already started school. The socialising function of nurseries was also considered important in order to prepare children for the *'shock'* of starting school. Some parents felt that out-of-school clubs benefited their children by providing opportunities to socialise and mix with friends.

Other sorts of stimulation, besides socialisation, were also important in influencing lone parents' childcare preferences, leading parents to consider the range and types of activities available in different settings. In general, it was considered important that children were not bored whilst in childcare and that a variety of activities and facilities were made available to them. Parents expressed particular concerns about children being left to watch television at childminders, and about a lack of outside space in which they could play at nurseries. Overall, nurseries and out-of-school clubs elicited more positive associations concerning both socialisation and stimulation than childminders.

For some parents, it was important that activities had educational content, though for others this was either unimportant or something to be actively avoided. Whilst some parents did not prioritise the educational element of childcare, the 12½ free weekly hours early years education provided for three and four year olds was generally approved of and seemed to be regarded by parents as an important way of preparing children for school.

Parents viewed childcare positively when they perceived that their child would develop both mentally and physically as a result of attending the setting; developmental activities mentioned included learning nursery rhymes, developing speech or becoming potty trained. For these reasons, it was important to some parents that their child was placed in a setting appropriate to their age and not put together with other children of a younger age, who might '*hold them back*'.

2.6   What shapes preferences for formal childcare?

2.6.1   Providers' qualifications and experience

Various kinds of information and assurance regarding providers' qualifications and experience played a role in forming parents' preferences for different kinds of formal childcare. For some parents, reassurance was particularly important with respect to childminders, with some parents describing how qualifications and certification had been very valuable in enabling them to go about *'gauging their skills'* and judging

the extent to which childminders were *'dedicated'* to their job. However, for some lone parents, reassurance did not necessarily come from qualifications, certificates, or even police checks. To these parents, qualifications meant very little and were not seen as indicative of their abilities as a carer, nor of the extent that they could be trusted with children. Rather, it was experience with children that was paramount, and particularly experience as a parent.

We have limited data about how parents learned about provider's qualifications and experience. Some did mention the list of registered childminders obtained from the local council and a few mentioned OFSTED checks as well. However, it seems that parents also gauged provider's qualifications and experience by more indirect methods – by visiting and talking to the providers, and generally observing how they treated the children in their care. For some, the length of time spent working as a childminder was taken as a mark of quality and experience. Others judged the provider's experience according to their age, which was also linked to whether they had experience as a parent. Other lone parents would only consider using providers they knew personally, so that they could be sure of having full information on their histories and previous experience.

Parents typically relied on recommendations, mainly from other parents, and reputations in choosing childcare providers; again, this was especially the case for childminders. Some relied on recommendations because of a lack of information on childcare from other sources, while others felt that recommendations provided greater guidance with regard to the quality and trustworthiness of the carer, especially if that recommendation came from a fellow parent. However, for some lone parents, relying on recommendations had led to difficulties. In some cases, they had heard different opinions from different sources, which had left them unsure as to which to believe, while others had encountered problems because the recommended providers had tended to be the most popular and therefore those with the longest waiting lists. We will discuss the role of childcare recommendations, alongside more formal sources on information, in detail in Chapter 5.

2.6.2 Age of child

We discussed earlier how a child's age can influence preferences towards parental and non-parental childcare; for some lone parents the same was true of different forms of formal childcare, although opinions varied on which provider types were most appropriate for children of different ages. Some parents, for example, considered childminders to be most suitable for babies and younger children on grounds that they provided one-to-one attention in a home-like environment, while other parents had concerns about leaving young children with childminders, particularly because they would not be able to tell the parent if something went wrong while they were there.

Similarly, some parents felt that childminders were preferable to other types of formal childcare because they were able to care for children of all ages, though others preferred nurseries to childminders for older pre-schoolers (over the age of

three). Children of this age were perceived as becoming more '*independent*' and thus as needing less one-to-one attention, as well as benefiting from a stimulating and socialising environment. Older children were considered to need more '*independence*' and out-of-school clubs were deemed more appropriate than childminders because they offered a variety of activities, although some parents criticised out-of-school clubs for a lack of age-appropriate activities.

2.6.3   The media

The influence of the media on views about childcare was not asked about directly for this study, but some lone parents mentioned the media spontaneously and stories in the press or on television sometimes appeared to have been important in shaping their views. Worries and mistrust were sometimes the result of media stories about children neglected in childcare, paedophilia, and '*child-beaters*'. Some lone parents talked about their trust of childcare providers, especially childminders, as having changed directly as a result of seeing programmes on television showing harmful behaviour by particular provider types. However, it was notable that some parents differentiated between media stories about incidents connected to the school environment compared with other childcare environments. Incidents occurring in schools were typically viewed as the exception rather than the norm, and tended not to inspire more than a general review of child safety in the parent's mind, whereas stories about other childcare providers sometimes elicited a more radical reaction, such as a decision to avoid a particular type of childcare altogether.

2.6.4   Past experiences

Both positive and negative past experiences had helped shape some lone parents' preferences for different types of formal childcare. For some, mistrust stemmed from bad experiences of using formal care, where their own or other children had been psychologically or physically mistreated, while others said that negative memories of being left with a childminder had been enough to shape a preference against using this provider type for their own child. In contrast, however, some lone parents felt that having attended a particular nursery themselves when they were young had led to a preference towards using the same provider for their own child, despite it being highly likely that the staff would have changed in the interim.

For some parents, views on formal childcare had changed after having the chance to try a provider out. These parents were typically those for whom the '*unless I know you I am not happy to leave my children with you*' attitude was related to, as one mother put it, '*fear of the unknown*'. Thus there were examples of lone parents' fears over trust and safety having been removed once formal childcare had successfully been tried and tested. One mother, for example, had heard media stories about abusive childminders, but since using formal childcare she no longer thought negatively about childminders or nurseries. Other parents gained reassurance about their child's safety at the provider by using web cameras on the internet or digital photographs sent to them via email. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the experiences of fellow parents can also help to shape preferences for different types

of formal childcare, and lone parents typically considered personal recommendations a very important source of childcare information. We will discuss this further in Chapter 5.

2.7   Conclusion

In this chapter, we have analysed the views, attitudes and beliefs about work and childcare among our sample of lone parents. We have described these and, as far as the data allow, sought to explain their origins. We have shown that attitudes and beliefs are not fixed but can change over time, and that some attitudes are harder than others to influence.

2.7.1   Work and parental childcare orientations

We have seen that people's orientations towards work and towards providing parental childcare can be formed independently of one another, and that they are also subject to change. Some of the lone parents we spoke to had high work orientations based variously on views of work as an important part of personal identity; as a valuable source of social stimulation; or because they felt that being a worker was part of providing a positive role model for their children. Previous quantitative research has shown that that 10 percent of working lone mothers would choose to take care of their children themselves (Woodland *et al.*, 2003). Those parents in our sample with high orientations towards parental childcare had also developed these as the result of a number of factors, including views about the rights and responsibilities of being a parent; the emotional value of parenting; or a perception that parental childcare was best placed to meet children's needs for security and stability. Other parents were less strongly attached to work or parental care respectively and, again, a number of causes were identified, including the parent's own upbringing, educational background and work history; their children's ages, characteristics and personalities; and the effects of becoming a parent or a lone parent.

Type 1 lone parents have been shown to experience the greatest tensions in trying to reconcile their work and childcare aspirations, while Type 2 parents typically faced fewer problems of reconciliation since they were committed to work and prepared to consider forms of non-parental childcare. While Types 3 and 4 lone parents were not so committed to employment, understanding how some of them came to be in work and what factors influenced their decisions about work and childcare will help us understand why these parents have weaker work orientations and what might be done to strengthen them. In the next chapter, we will go on to look in detail at the challenges our lone parents faced in seeking to combine work and childcare in practice. Then, in Chapter 6, we will go on to consider the different opportunities and challenges for policy presented by the four different 'types' of lone parent in our study.

2.7.2   Preferences for different forms of non-parental childcare

As previous research has shown, lone parents have diverse views about the relative merits and desirability of informal and formal types of childcare, and about different types of formal provision. This study has built on this evidence, confirming that some lone parents have a strong and deeply-embedded preference for informal over formal childcare, others associate a range of benefits with use of formal provision or a combination of the two.

Research has found that mothers are likely to choose one provider over another because they are considered trustworthy (Woodland *et al.*, 2002). Our research has highlighted how issues of trust and familiarity are entrenched in lone parents' childcare preferences. Concerns about trust, safety and commitment were among the strongest determinants of some parents' preferences for informal over formal care, and also influenced preferences for different types of formal childcare (group-based provision over childminders, for example). Previous research has also shown that mothers choose one provider over another because they consider them to share their values about caring for or bringing up children (Woodland *et al.*, 2002). Our study has seen the extent to which a shared understanding between parent and carer was important for lone parents, and typically linked with a preference for informal care.

Perceptions of whether children will be happy in particular types of childcare setting, and the extent to which providers show genuine interest and affection towards the child, have also been shown to shape views about childcare (Woodland *et al.*, 2002), and again, our research supported these findings. We have also provided further insight into how opportunities for socialisation and stimulation are important in forming lone parents' preferences for certain types of formal childcare. We have shown that, while carers' qualifications and accreditation were of interest to some parents, experience was considered the strongest predictor of ability. In addition, parents were likely to derive assessments of provider quality from the recommendations of other parents, which, they felt, could provide particular reassurance regarding providers' trustworthiness. Other influences on childcare preferences included the child's age; experience of using certain forms of childcare in the past; and, for some, the media's (usually negative) portrayal of childcare provision.

Parents' concerns about trust, though perhaps impossible to erase completely, pose a challenge for policy. There are various ways in which a greater degree of reassurance might be provided: more hands-on training of the childcare workforce, for example, an enhancement of existing inspection and accreditation procedures, or increased provision of taster sessions for parents. Efforts might also be made to promote a more positive picture of formal childcare and what it can offer (including through the media).

It is also important, however, for policymakers to recognise that some lone parents genuinely prefer parental or informal childcare to all forms of formal care, and that, in some cases, it may be the most appropriate and effective option for them (for

example, it may be the case that parents' reticence about leaving their child in formal care in the late evening or at night could not be resolved by introducing 24-hour formal provision). Individual lone parents have different preferences about work and childcare, and it must be understood that these vary in their malleability. For this reason, the first priority must be to support the provision of a variety of forms of childcare, informal as well as formal, and of different types, as appropriate to different parents and children.

3   Lone parents' decisions about work

In this chapter, we will build on Chapter 2's discussion of lone parents' beliefs and attitudes about work and childcare by going on to look at the factors that may influence a lone parent's thinking about whether or not to (re-)enter the labour market. We will consider the ways in which decisions about work are reached, the factors involved in the decision process and whether there are particular considerations, circumstances or events that can make the difference in a lone parent's decision about whether to work. We will also look at the difference between making a decision about whether to look for work and putting that decision into practice. Finally, we will focus on the period of transition into work, exploring the 'mechanics' of that transition and any difficulties, worries or concerns that may be involved.

3.1   Coming to a decision about work

In this section, we look at the factors involved in decisions about work, the choices and compromises that parents have to make and the 'shape' of the decision process itself. At the end of the section, we will also discuss whether there are any particular factors that tend to make the difference in a lone parent's decision about whether to work.

This section aims to represent the ways in which lone parents come to a decision about whether to work, while Section 3.2 will go on to discuss how they might put this decision into practice by securing a work-childcare combination that is suitable for them. Clearly, however, the two are closely inter-related: crucially, it must be borne in mind that, if the practical obstacles prove too great, the initial decision to look for work can ultimately be reversed.

3.1.1   Factors in the decision

Here, we discuss the three main broad categories of factor that tended to be involved in lone parents' decisions about whether to work: financial factors, 'parent-

centred' factors and 'child-centred' factors. It must be acknowledged at the outset that, to some extent, the distinction between factors related to parents' needs and desires and those related to the needs and desires of their children is somewhat artificial: the parents we spoke to expressed a strong interest in and commitment to their children's fulfilment and well-being and, in this sense, for some of them, the needs and desires of their children effectively became their own. Nevertheless, as we will see, coming to a decision about whether to work often involves an attempt to balance the needs and desires of parent and child, and in that respect the distinction will help us in aiming to describe the ways in which lone parents arrive at decisions about work.

Financial factors

In Chapter Two, we talked about the fact that financial factors can play a role in shaping a lone parent's work orientation, for example in terms of the extent to which they view their role within the family as that of provider, and the extent to which they are affected by stigmas attached to being out-of-work or '*sponging off the state*'. On a more pragmatic level also, the perceived financial benefits or penalties of working were paramount in many lone parents' decisions about work. Some lone parents cited money as a reason **not** to work: typically these were parents with a low level of skills and qualifications (and thus lower earning potential) or those with a larger number of children (and thus a greater need for childcare). However, there were some parents who had higher earnings potential and relatively strong work orientations who also said that they were not working for financial reasons: in these cases a lack of available childcare, sometimes coupled with an aversion to particular types of childcare, tended to be responsible.

Where money was cited as a reason not to work, the cost of childcare could be a significant factor in the decision, along with the loss of subsidies for rent and council tax. Some lone parents expressed the sense that it would be daunting to let go of the '*security*' of being on benefits, which, they felt, would leave them bearing the full financial burden of the household alone. In addition, working was viewed by different parents as having either a positive or a negative connection with home ownership: some working parents felt they were obliged to keep working in order to keep paying their mortgages, while some non-working parents worried that their mortgages might be put in jeopardy if their financial circumstances were to change as a result of entry into work. In both sorts of case, there was evidence of a connection between having to revert to renting accommodation (especially if this meant social housing) and sometimes, as indicated in Chapter Two, a loss of independence or self-respect.

Where financial considerations had encouraged or were encouraging parents to move **into** work, this was sometimes for positive ('pull') reasons – e.g. affording more things for themselves and their families, having a bit more money for 'treats' and 'luxuries' – and sometimes for negative ('push') ones, including the aforementioned stigma associated with receiving Income Support. The power of potential financial benefit to act as an incentive to enter work applied to parents with a wide range of characteristics in terms of employment and educational history,

work orientation, employability, and so on. Some respondents expressed a particular determination not to let their quality of life drop as a result of becoming a lone parent, particularly if they had not received or did not anticipate receiving financial support from an ex-partner (NB in general, in the study, non-resident partners were conspicuous by their absence).

The availability of Working Tax Credit (WTC), specifically the childcare element, had clearly made a great difference to some parents' perceptions of the feasibility or desirability of working and several parents cited this as the main influence over their decision. These parents tended to be those with a higher level of skills and/or qualifications, and therefore higher earnings potential; they also tended to have fewer children, so their childcare needs were limited. In particular, WTC was seen not only as a way of making work financially viable, but of making **part-time** work financially viable: as one parent put it, of allowing them 'the best of both worlds'. We will come back to the issue of part-time working when we consider what constitutes 'suitable' work for lone parents in Section 3.2.

Finally, it was also clear that the availability or lack of financial support could have an influence on lone parents' decisions about entering education or training, as well as entering work. Some parents – particularly those with a higher level of skills or strong work orientation – felt that working would be made substantially more attractive if they were able to 'invest' in a long-term career path, rather than merely to work in order to subsist; in these cases, the availability of financial support for education and training could have a strong influence over their decisions about whether to work.

'Parent-centred' factors

Parent-centred considerations can be very important in orientating lone parents towards paid work. As we saw in Chapter 2, these considerations can include a need or desire to '*get out of the house*', to relieve boredom or depression, or to interact with other adults. As discussed in Chapter 2, some parents even went so far as to say that work was essential for their happiness, self-esteem or '*sanity*'. In some cases, the priority assigned to these sorts of considerations stemmed to a greater or lesser extent from having become a lone parent, which can be an isolating and lonely experience and, for some parents, can entail moving to a new area, perhaps to be near family members, to make a 'fresh start' or even to escape a dangerous or violent situation. For lone parents in these sorts of situations, work can be seen as an important way of developing new social networks.

In Chapter 2, we also described some lone parents as tending to see work as an important element of their personal identity. This did not, however, imply that they felt they had compromised their children's needs or desires in any way; only that their decision about working had been primarily parent-centred rather than child-centred. In some of these cases, parents gave a clear account of having prioritised their own needs over those of their children, by first finding a suitable job (or course of study or training) and then fitting their childcare arrangements around it. Parents who were strongly career-orientated were also more likely to have made decisions

about the type of work they undertook or their working hours on the basis of parent-centred factors: for example, one mother explained that she had decided to return to work full-time as she felt it was a necessary pre-condition of her progressing into a management position.

In the same way, parent-centred factors may include needs and desires which can lead to a lower work orientation, such as a fear of going out to work or a lack of confidence stemming from perceived low employability or lack of skills. And, as we have already seen, both positive and negative factors can change over time: for example, some parents reported that their desire to work had increased as a result of seeing a friend benefit from working, while others described how it had ebbed away during a period out of work (usually following the birth of a child) when they had '*got lazy*' or '*got into the habit*' of being out of work.

There was also a sense that, for some lone parents, the idea of undertaking work alongside all their other roles and responsibilities, was simply '*too much*'. In some cases, this sort of view was associated with having a large number of young children, with perceived low employability or with experienced or anticipated transport problems; in one case, worries were based on a bad past experience which had led to the parent giving up work for this reason. It was also notable, however, that some parents who expressed concern about combining work with the rest of family life were nevertheless strongly work-orientated, suggesting that measures to overcome this perception and reassure parents could have a beneficial effect. Parents' needs and desires tended to take the form of concerns about being too tired, having to rush around or finding themselves under excess pressure or stress, for example, because they might have to leave work at short-notice if their child was ill or find themselves panicking about collecting a child from school or childcare if they were late leaving work or got stuck in traffic. We will come on to discuss what constitutes 'suitable' work-childcare combinations for lone parents in Section 3.2, while the challenges involved in coordinating work and childcare on an everyday basis will be explored in detail in Chapter 4.

'Child-centred' factors

Our discussion in Chapter 2 also showed how considerations about children's needs and desires could influence both a lone parent's work and parental care orientations. And indeed, some lone parents' decisions about work could be characterised as primarily 'child-centred', whether that meant deciding not to work on grounds that children benefit from a substantial amount of parental care; deciding to (re-)enter work due to a feeling that parental work had advantages for children as well as parents; or feeling that work had both advantages and disadvantages for children, and thus having to find some way of resolving the resulting tensions and converting them into an ultimate decision.

We also made the point in Chapter 2 that both work and parental care orientations can change over time in response to children's changing life stages. Thus, where a lone parent's thinking about work was primarily or partly 'child-centred', decisions

about work were very likely to be linked to a child's age or life stage. These links tended to focus on the following key junctures in a child's development:

• reaching an age where he or she is old enough to tell you about what happens at the childcare provider;

• reaching an age where he or she can begin early years education (NB most parents referred to this as '*reaching nursery age*');

• reaching an age where he or she can attend full-time school;

• reaching an age where he or she can travel to and/or from school alone.

Some parents had rather strong views on whether, how much and what type of non-parental care is appropriate for children at different life stages, although, as we said in Chapter 2, the concept of 'readiness' for (different types of) non-parental care was also closely linked to the needs of individual children, for example, because of special medical or educational needs or particular characteristics such as being shy or '*clingy*'.

Parents who said that they would not return to work until their children were old enough to tell them about what was happening at the childcare provider were usually concerned with issues of trust and safety (as indicated in Chapter 2, this threshold was particularly associated with the use of childminders). In contrast, parents seemed to feel that group-based provision could be intrinsically safer by virtue of there being several members of staff present at any one time, although some of those parents who had very strong concerns regarding trust and safety expressed a strong preference to stick with informal care.

The decision to wait until the children were old enough to start early years education was often associated with views and perceptions of other forms of childcare: concerns about trusting childminders, a lack of or resistance to informal provision, beliefs or worries about the cost, availability or suitability of day care, and so on. Early years education is universally available and free of charge, which is likely to be a key reason why lone parents generally considered it the 'norm' for children to receive it. In addition, it was seen as important for their development and for preparing them to start school, in a way that other pre-school providers (especially childminders and informal care) were not – a feature which was of particular relevance to parents who felt that it was very important to put the needs of their children first. However, early years education also tends to be available on a part-time basis and is usually provided in sessions of around two-and-a-half hours; for this reason it was often seen by parents as having little impact on the possibility of working, particularly if they were unable or reluctant to use additional non-parental care. It is also worth noting that other research has highlighted a range of problems that can be associated with early years education, for example the fact that some childminders are only prepared to take children to and from specified providers or that they typically still require paying for the two-and-a-half hours while the child is receiving the early years education (undermining the financial impact of receiving free provision). Some parents have also complained of a lack of easily combined wraparound provision in the settings

where early years education is provided. For these and other reasons, some parents have expressed the view that they would prefer to use their 12.5 hours within, say, two or three days a week, rather than spreading them evenly across the five days Monday to Friday (Harries *et al.*, 2004), and, indeed, the Government has recently announced that parents will be able to use this provision more flexibly in future.

Although the decision not to work until a child had reached the age for full-time school was 'child-centred' in the sense that it was driven by the age of the child, in fact the main motivations for such a decision seemed to focus less on concerns about the child's well-being than on considerations relating to the cost of childcare or, more specifically, the cost of **enough** childcare to enable the parent to work, particularly if he or she had more than one child to think about. For this reason, as indicated in Chapter 2, some parents had taken the decision – sometimes very early on in the child's life – that it would not be feasible for them to work until all their children were in full-time education, but that, when that happened, it would be '*their time*', time for them to '*get their lives back*' or '*start living again*'. It was also notable that parents with very negative views of the effects of parental work on young children were liable to identify the point of entry into full-time school as a clear threshold with regard to working: one mother even indicated that she did not consider working part-time while her child was at school to qualify her for the title of 'working parent' at all!

While the beginning of full-time school was clearly a watershed moment for many parents, it is also important to note that some parents considered it unfeasible or undesirable for them to work until their children were old enough to travel to and/or from school alone, either because they considered it dangerous or because they simply felt it was inappropriate. This was clearly related to whether they perceived that somebody else they trusted might be able to accompany the children on these journeys, although some parents had decided that they could not work until their children were able to travel to and from school alone because of an assumption that childcare would not be available for such short periods. Parents who felt that entering work would mean working longer than school hours were sometimes unhappy about the prospect of their children travelling home from an after-school club in the early evening if they could not get there in time to pick them up (typically, after-school clubs seemed to stay open until around 6pm, which was not late enough for all parents who needed or wanted to work full-time). Concerns were also raised about how children might make the transfer between school and an after-school club or recreational activity where this was not (perceived to be) arranged on their behalf. For parents who were not in a position to ask for assistance from family or friends, concerns about how children would get to and from school in their absence appeared to represent a 'dead-end' in their thinking because they did not feel that formal childcare would be available for such short periods of time; one lone mother who lived in a rural area commented that no provider, formal or informal, would be able to '*cover*' her journey because it was long and her home was out-of-the-way. We will come on to talk about the significance of journeys to and from school and childcare settings in terms of coordinating work and care in Chapter 4.

Finally, as well as concerns about their own tiredness and stress, parents also expressed worries about the potential effects of a demanding work-childcare routine on their children. For example, as mentioned in Chapter 2, parents of school-age children commonly worried about out-of-school clubs making the '*day too long*' for their children, possibly leading them to be tired or irritable; some said they did not want the childcare providers to get the '*best part of the day*', leaving them with nothing to do but feed, bathe and put to bed.

3.1.2   Prioritising and compromising

The question of which factors play a part in a decision about whether to work is distinct from but closely related to the question of whether parents view themselves as having to prioritise their concerns or make compromises in order to facilitate a decision about work (NB at this stage, we are still talking about *hypothetical* priorities and compromises, relating to an overall decision about (re-)entering work; the issue of what it actually takes to achieve a suitable work-childcare combination will be addressed in Section 3.2).

Some parents with strong work orientations conceded that they were prepared to make compromises related to childcare in order to be able to pursue their own needs and desires related to work, either because they anticipated that their earnings would not enable them to afford a preferred provider or that their preferred provider would not be compatible with their work (e.g. for reasons of location or opening hours). Such compromises usually meant conceding that they may have to use a childcare provider they perceived as being less than ideal in terms of quality, or of a type that was not their first choice. However, there also seemed to be some childcare compromises which no parent was prepared to contemplate, namely those which implied sacrifices of trust, safety and a minimum standard of 'quality', which, as we indicated in Chapter 2, tended to be judged primarily on criteria relating to staff ratios, experience and competence, while other factors such as cleanliness, hygiene, facilities and activities were also taken into account.

Similarly, in cases where parents had prioritised the needs and desires of their children over their own – most commonly associated with the decision <u>not</u> to go to work or to work a very small number of hours, e.g. in order to avoid using childcare – this was sometimes perceived as having directly caused a compromise of some kind, perhaps in terms of money, career aspirations or development, stimulation, social interaction or personal identity. In some cases, child-centred concerns had motivated parents to use informal care and this may also have had associated 'career costs', either because the informal carer was only available to provide care at certain times, or because parents were wary of asking for a large number of hours of care, feeling it would be '*imposing*' or '*asking too much*' of their friends or family (we will talk in more detail about negotiations and agreements with informal childcare providers in Chapter 4).

In addition to compromises aimed at resolving tensions between parent-centred and child-centred factors, some parents perceived themselves as having made

compromises *within* each of these categories. For example, even for parents with strong work orientations, the decision to work was sometimes described as having entailed a cost in terms of making their lives more demanding or tiring, or preventing them from enjoying as much quality time with the children. In terms of child-centred considerations, some non-working parents recognised that, while their decision not to work might allow their child(ren) what they perceived as being the unique benefits of parental childcare, it might, at the same time, deny them certain financial rewards or the working '*role model*' to which some lone parents seemed to attach such great significance.

3.1.3   The decision process

Discussion of 'factors', 'priorities' and 'compromises' may create the misleading impression that lone parents' decisions about work are always made by means of a precise and detailed calculation, wherein the pros and cons of working are carefully weighed up to reach an overall optimal solution. In fact, while some parents do reach their decision by means of a process approximating this sort of model, for others, the process can look quite different.

The processes by which our lone parents reached their decisions about whether to work may broadly be classified as one of the following:

• overall calculation;

• partial perspective;

• norms - or perceptions-based;

• prompt or gateway.

Overall calculation

Parents who did engage in a 'calculation' in order to arrive at a decision about whether to work had usually done so with the support and assistance of somebody else, either a friend or family member, or a professional such as their New Deal for Lone Parents adviser. Some calculations were solely financial – would the parents be better or worse off in work? – but, often, other factors would also be involved, including the potential impacts of working on children and family life in general. Where a friend or, more commonly, a family member was involved in assisting the calculation, this was sometimes associated with an offer of informal care, which seemed to give the third party a clearer role or 'investment' in the lone parent's decision. The part played by NDLP advisers in the decision process seemed to vary quite widely: some parents described a thorough and 'holistic' service, whereby advisers had addressed a range of concerns, including giving practical advice about specific jobs and childcare providers. In other cases, however, advisers seemed to have focused all their attention on certain aspects of the calculation – most commonly the financial implications of coming off benefits and into work (the 'better-off' calculation) – while neglecting others, such as finding suitable childcare or finding work to fit with family responsibilities. Some parents also raised the issue

of the difficulty of calculating the financial implications of returning to work without a good idea of their earnings potential, which may be a particular issue for parents who have never worked or who have been out of work for a long period of time. The decision about whether to (re-) enter work was typically seen as important and high-impact by these parents, and any gaps in the calculation could be seen as indicative of risk and, on that basis, prove unsettling.

It is also worth noting that information on childcare tended to be an important element in 'calculations' about the implications of (re-)entering work, and that those parents whose decisions processes most closely resembled this model were also more likely to have taken a proactive approach to finding such information. Issues around the kind of childcare information that is available to parents, and the ways in which such information is disseminated, will be considered in Chapter 5, where we explore lone parents' policy messages.

Partial perspective

For some lone parents, however, the decision of whether or not to work was not arrived at by means of a calculation, but through a process which was somewhat less balanced and controlled. The decision process of some parents might be characterised as originating in a 'partial perspective', in other words, they arrived at a decision by focusing it down to some subset of the different factors involved in their thinking about work, e.g. by thinking only about their own career aspirations or only about the needs of their children, and suspending or postponing the other factors until these had been dealt with. A 'partial' approach often reflected a short-term perspective, and was particularly associated with the perception that circumstances were destined to change: one of the student parents we spoke to, for example, admitted to having no idea what she would do about childcare once her training was complete and she was ready to enter work. The temptation to come to a decision about whether to work based on a partial perspective seemed, in many of these cases, to be a reaction to the feeling that taking all factors into account at once was too big a task or challenge to manage; in some cases, parents seemed to feel that the challenge was so big that their only option was to approach it gradually or *'in bits'*. A sense of having too many issues to tackle or too much to cope with at once came through strongly from some lone parents, and highlights a considerable need for support, particularly during a transition into work. In Section 3.3, we focus on this transition and discuss both the nature of the support lone parents require around this time, and where they tend to find it.

Norms- or perceptions-based

In Chapter 2, we talked about the role perceived norms – stemming, for example, from a lone parent's own upbringing – can play in forming work and parental care orientations. Accordingly, norms sometimes had an influence over decisions about work, although those parents who arrived at a decision about work by means of a 'norms- or perceptions-based' process did not typically perceive themselves as having made a 'decision' about whether to work at all. Rather, their working status

was determined by some norm or perceived norm, stemming from friends, family, communities or society more widely, or from perceptions about the feasibility of working that were long-standing and general, rather than based on particular items of information or evidence (again, the issue of how easily information was available is also relevant here and will be revisited in Chapter Five). We have already mentioned parents who said they had never considered returning to work while they were caring for (young) children and those who, on the contrary, said they had always assumed they would do so. Similarly, some parents were working or not working as a result of perceptions about what was feasible, not for them specifically but at a more general level; for example, that it was not financially beneficial for parents to work before their children started school or that there were no jobs available that could fit around school hours. For these parents, working or not working was not a matter of 'choices' or 'decisions', but of (perceived) necessity.

Prompts and gateways

For some parents, the process of coming to a decision about work focused specifically on a single event or series of events, or on a particular set of circumstances. For example, as we have seen in Chapter 2, a relationship break-up or bereavement can have a considerable effect on parents' thinking about work, as can health-related circumstances (for parents and children) and other problems (e.g. domestic violence, drug use). Some parents' work decisions had also been shaped by positive prompts such as an offer of work or childcare and could therefore be characterised as essentially reactive. Some expressed the view that they had been '*lucky'* to have come across an opportunity to combine work and childcare, perceiving such opportunities to be the exception rather than the rule, sometimes on the basis of their observations of relatives, friends or acquaintances who were also lone parents.

Aside from events or circumstances that determine or 'prompt' a decision about whether to (re-) enter work, some parents described particular experiences that had provided them with a 'gateway' into the labour market. Perhaps the most important gateway was education or training, which can benefit parents not only in terms of developing skills and obtaining qualifications, but also across a wide range of dimensions including work orientation, confidence and self-esteem. Study and training can be particularly helpful for parents who have never worked or who have had a long career break, either owing to a pregnancy or for other reasons. Educational activities were seen by some parents as a longer-term investment towards a '*career*' rather than '*just a job*'; for others, they were attractive because they represented an opportunity for (re-)entering work gradually, possibly in a way that was more compatible with their childcare needs (e.g. because it involved fewer or more flexible hours) or because they could adjust the pace of their training according to their families' needs. These findings are in line with the evidence gathered through previous research on student parents (La Valle *et al.*, 2002b).

Aside from education and training, voluntary work within a school or childcare setting also emerged as an important 'gateway' for some lone parents: several parents who were working as helpers or volunteers clearly perceived this as a route

into paid work over the shorter or longer term. There was a sense, particularly among parents who had never worked or had been out of work for a long period of time, and among those who lacked confidence about working, that schools and childcare settings were '*safe*' or familiar environments, where they knew what they were doing and did not feel intimidated. They could also feel secure in the knowledge that this was one form of work-related activity that would not conflict with the needs of their children, both because of the hours involved and because the environments (it was assumed) understood the needs of children and would be sympathetic to the parent's perspective. In addition, voluntary work provided some parents with the non-financial benefits of working without requiring them to resign the '*security*' of being on benefits or to risk the potentially severe consequences of miscalculating the financial implications of working (e.g. losing a mortgage). Finally, there was a sense that, for parents who were intimidated by, or not orientated towards, work, voluntary rather than paid involvement in a workplace could feel more secure insofar as it was less 'binding' than paid work, the dynamics of the employer-employee relationship were different and, ultimately, parents were free to withdraw.

Moving between models

Aside from specific prompts or gateways that led directly to a change in attitudes towards work, there was evidence that other factors could help shape the nature of the decision process. In particular, it was clear that the provision of adequate and relevant information about both work and childcare opportunities had the potential to move parents away from the 'partial perspective' and 'norms- or perceptions-based' categories, and equip them to make more of a formal calculation about the implications – financial and otherwise – of taking up work. However, where a parent was initially resistant to the possibility of working, perhaps owing to low perceived employability, challenging circumstances, nervousness, or a perception that it was the norm for mothers of young children **not** to work, information may not have been enough. In these sorts of cases, more intensive and personalised support and encouragement were often required, and here a positive, productive face-to-face relationship with an NDLP adviser could play a vital role. We will come on to discuss lone parents' views and experiences of the NDLP, as well as the wider issue of information on work and childcare, in Chapter 5.

3.1.4   What made the difference?

The general impression that emerged from the study was that lone parents' decisions about work were typically made on the basis of a substantial number of factors, all of which required satisfactory solutions if they were ultimately to achieve a delicate balance of arrangements, which would facilitate the tricky combination of paid work and family responsibilities. There was very little evidence, therefore, that a decision about whether or not to (re-) enter work might be taken on the basis of one consideration in isolation. However, some factors did stand out as being particularly important and, for some parents, it appeared that, while these were not sufficient for making a decision about work, they were certainly necessary conditions of any such decision being made.

The New Deal for Lone Parents and the Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit

Government intervention under the NDLP was clearly fundamental in some parents' decisions about whether to work, as had the availability of financial support through the childcare element of the WTC (as mentioned earlier). Several parents attributed their (re-)entry into work directly to their involvement with the NDLP: these parents tended to be among the more highly-skilled, highly-qualified and strongly work-orientated. Information about the childcare element of the WTC and the carrying out of a 'better-off' calculation had often been a strong influence in these cases; it was also clear that a 'holistic' approach, whereby the adviser addressed other issues such as finding and paying for childcare provision, had been particularly successful for some parents. Even in some cases where parents had not yet entered work, there were signs that the NDLP was moving their thinking forward by presenting them with opportunities that they may not previously have considered, and again particularly by informing them about the childcare element of the WTC.

Although some parents had responded negatively to the initial approach from NDLP, finding it '*cheeky*' or intrusive, or feeling that it implied they '*ought*' to be in work, there was a sense that others appreciated the 'exploratory' nature of the programme and the fact that they were able to develop an ongoing relationship with their adviser. Equally, while some parents found that the service they received from their NDLP adviser was limited or inflexible in some respects, others commented on the experience of a process focused on finding a way for them to reach their goals rather than to impose somebody else's goals on them. We will explore lone parents' policy messages regarding both the WTC and the NDLP in Chapter 5.

Availability of childcare

Childcare availability is clearly a key factor in many parents' decisions about whether to work, whether this be related to cost, type, hours, times, location, quality, trust, safety or a combination of all these factors. We have already mentioned, for example, a group of lone parents who stated that they would not work if they could not find a satisfactory childcare provider and, while some parents may be prepared to make certain compromises when it come to childcare, ultimately the question of whether they can find childcare that meets their minimum standards – of affordability, accessibility, quality and, crucially, trust – was certainly of primary importance in lone parents' decisions about whether to work.

Among all the childcare-related factors, however, the availability of **informal** childcare very commonly made the difference in a decision about whether to work. This was true of parents with a variety of jobs and work orientations, and was commonly related to a perceived lack of formal childcare in the local area or the need or desire to avoid the cost of formal care. In some cases, the role played by informal childcare was primarily or solely financial: for some parents (particularly those with several children or low earnings potential), it seems that childcare has to be free to be feasible, sometimes in spite of the help afforded by WTC (although, as we have

mentioned, the childcare element of the WTC had also made a big difference to some parents). In other cases, the significance of informal care related to a strong preference for friends or family as the '*next best thing*' to parental care and, at the extreme, an aversion to all forms of formal pre-school care, usually on grounds of trust. And sometimes the availability of informal care was crucial to parents' decisions about whether to work because of coordination factors, including evidence or perceptions that other forms of care would not be as flexible, i.e. would not be available at atypical times (a consideration especially relevant to shift and night workers), for small numbers of hours (e.g. '*the school run*') or on an ad hoc or irregular basis. In some cases, aversion to formal care and perceived exclusive associations between informal care and affordability, availability and flexibility were partly the result of a lack of information about the availability, cost and flexibility of formal provision. Nevertheless, for all these reasons, some lone parents were very clear that the availability of informal care was what made the difference in their decision about work.

It is notable that, while lone parents used a variety of family members and friends for informal childcare, in general, non-resident parents appeared to play a much less significant role. There were exceptions to this, however, such as one strongly work-orientated lone mother whose ex-partner had a much weaker work-orientation and had agreed, on that basis, to provide childcare (both parents also had a strong aversion to formal childcare on cultural grounds). Here, the non-resident parent had such a significant involvement with childcare, that the mother said she did not effectively consider herself to be a lone parent at all.

The 'better-off' calculation – does working have to be 'worth it'?

Whether carried out with or without the support of an NDLP adviser, the calculation of whether working would make a family financially 'better off' typically represented the 'bottom line' for lone parents. Parents who talked at length about the potential non-financial benefits of working, the need to provide a '*role model*' for children, the stigma of being on benefits and so on, were still quite clear that working for no financial reward was simply not an option, particularly as work usually came at the cost of spending less time with children:

> '*What is the point of slogging your guts out at work, if you can get the same money for looking after your child?*'

> (lone mother of six-year old, worker)

Moreover, some parents' aversion to '*working for nothing*' was not just about the financial benefits of working, but also about a feeling that a failure to come out 'better off' might actually undermine some of the *non*-financial benefits of working as well. We have already described how a substantial part of the attraction of work was linked to parents' pride and self-esteem, a sense of having a purpose or function, of being '*on a level*' with other adults. If they were to work without earning, arguably the potential of work to make them feel useful, to help them

perceive themselves as having something to offer beyond the realms of home and family, or even for making them feel '*normal*' might be weakened as well.

There were, however, a few exceptions to the 'better-off' rule. Some parents claimed that they would work – or even were working – for very little or no financial reward. In some cases this was explained in terms of the non-financial benefits of working, but it was also likely to be linked to the notion of a long-term investment, i.e. it might be considered acceptable to work without financial reward in the short-term if it helped to develop a parent's career so that, eventually, work would start to pay off financially as well as in other ways. In addition, as we have already mentioned, some parents in the sample had undertaken voluntary work, usually within school or childcare settings. In some cases, these activities were viewed as 'gateways' into work, and so to financial advantage; in others, they were simply a way of '*getting out of the house*'. The voluntary work undertaken typically involved a small number of hours at convenient times, and was of a type that the parent enjoyed or had a particular interest in.

3.2   Finding a 'suitable' work-childcare combination

So far in this chapter, we have been talking about the ways in which lone parents reach a decision about whether or not to work. This has involved some discussion of their knowledge and perceptions of the availability of suitable work and childcare because while the decision about whether to look for work is logically prior to the question of whether work will be feasible in practice, practical considerations and projections nevertheless often play a significant part.

'Suitable' work or childcare can be defined as that which is available, obtainable, desirable and capable of being coordinated with other aspects of lone parents' lives. In this section, we will explore all these aspects of suitability, as well as the facilitators and barriers that affect the way in which a decision about whether to work in principle can be put into practice.

3.2.1   'Suitable' work

Perceptions of the availability of 'suitable' work depend on perceptions about the local labour market; parents' employability (skills, qualifications and experience); the potential financial and non-financial benefits of work; and the potential for coordinating work with other aspects of parents' lives, primarily their childcare responsibilities.

Local employment opportunities

Several of the parents we spoke to expressed doubts about whether jobs that were obtainable to them were available in their local area. In some cases, this was simply attributed to the state of local labour market, which was a particular problem for parents who were unable or unwilling to travel beyond the local vicinity, either for reasons of transport or coordination, or because they would not feel comfortable

working far from home or away from their children's schools and/or childcare providers. In other cases, concerns about being able to get a job were explicitly related to limitations on the parent's skills, qualifications or experience; a low level of confidence might also have an (implicit) effect on a parent's perception of their own employability. Parents who had never worked or had spent a significant period out of work were particularly likely to express these kinds of doubts. There was some evidence that even a relatively short period out of the labour market could change a parent's perception of their own employability: one mother, for example, said she expected that, having been out of work for two years, any potential employer would wonder '*what she'd been doing*' and would be likely to offer the job to someone who had not taken such a break. Other parents talked about experiences of being asked in job interviews about whether they had children, whether they were lone parents or what they would do if a child was sick; in all cases where this had happened, parents had viewed their answers as having a potentially detrimental effect on their chances of getting the job.

Some parents felt that, while they might be able to get a job in their local area, they would have difficulty finding a job they **wanted**. This sometimes meant they experienced or anticipated problems finding work that was enjoyable or rewarding or furthered their careers; in other cases, it was a reflection on the possibility of finding a job that would make working financially worthwhile. It could also refer to other aspects of the type of work, such as whether it was temporary: one lone mother commented on the fact that much of the work available in her area was temporary and that this was not very suitable for (lone) parents owing to the fact that they were likely to need to set up and commit to childcare arrangements.

The question of whether a job was deemed suitable was also typically strongly determined by the potential for coordinating work with other aspects of family life.

Finding work and childcare that can be coordinated with each other and with other aspects of family life can be extremely difficult for lone parents. It is perhaps little wonder, therefore, that coordination factors play such a large role in the feasibility of finding a suitable work-childcare combination. In Chapter 4, we will come on to talk in detail about how lone parents were managing to coordinate their work and childcare arrangements and what problems they experienced in seeking to do so. First, in this chapter, we will briefly outline the key elements that determine whether work is viewed as possessing potential for coordination.

Hours, days and times

Lone parents expressed a strong desire for part-time work, focusing particularly on confining work solely to school hours. Several reasons for desiring school-hours work were cited, including a lack of, or aversion to, out-of-school childcare (formal or informal), a need or desire to avoid paying for childcare, concerns about how children might get to and from school and a desire to be personally present at home during mornings and/or evenings, and/or waiting at the school gates in order to

have contact with staff, because the children wanted them there or because they felt they '*ought*' to be there:

> '*I always used to feel sorry for the people in my class who didn't have that, who had to let themselves in from school or […] you know, had to go somewhere else.*'

(lone mother of 16-year-old, 13-year-old and five-year old, worker)

As discussed in Chapter 2, some parents wanted to work particular hours because they felt they needed to be around for their children owing to an event such as a relationship break-up or bereavement, or because the child had special needs or characteristics (e.g. wanting to be around at meal times because the child was very fussy about food). For others, the desire to work part-time was primarily 'parent-centred', for example because they were nervous about returning to work and wanted to do so gradually ('*a little job in the mornings*'), or because the idea of working for a large number of hours made them worry about coping with work alongside other responsibilities.

Term-time work was also considered desirable by some parents, although it was mentioned less often than part-time and school-hours working and, overall, perceived as being more difficult to secure (which may, of course, be one reason why it was mentioned less often). Nevertheless, the school holidays tended to be at the forefront of working parents' thoughts, and in some cases – particularly where informal care was unavailable, or parents did not want to ask for help from family and friends – other 'ad hoc' days off such as INSET days or days when a child was sick were also an issue. Concerns about both regular and ad hoc time off school were sometimes underlying parents' perceptions that they could not work or that the only work they could feasibly undertake would be within schools or childcare settings.

However, while there was considerable evidence of part-time, school-hours and term-time working among the lone parents we spoke to, other forms of non-standard hours patterns worked by partnered parents were little in evidence. This may partly be explained by the notable rarity of 'shift-parenting' arrangements with non-resident parents among the lone parents we spoke to: in one case where a lone mother had attempted to set up a 'shift-parenting' arrangement with her ex-husband, whereby he provided childcare while she worked in the evenings, this had not worked out and she had eventually changed her shifts so that her children could be looked after by a friend instead. There were several examples of successful 'shift-caring' with informal carers other than non-resident parents, such as another mother who chose to work nights so that her parents – who worked during the day – could look after her children. Those lone parents who did undertake work at atypical times – night-time or shift work, for example, as well as those who worked at weekends – had almost always assumed that they would have to rely on informal childcare when seeking a suitable work-childcare combination. Therefore, for these parents, the suitability of a job would be determined by whether it could be coordinated with the hours and times when family and friends would be available to care for the children.

It is also worth noting, as mentioned in Chapter 2, that some parents expressed a resistance to using formal childcare at atypical times (particularly during the late evening or at night). It was not possible to explore the possible causes of this resistance in detail, but there was a sense that concerns about trust and safety could be one factor, while other research has shown that some parents prefer to have childcare provided in the home at atypical times or would not want to use regular formal care at what they consider to be 'family times', although they might consider doing so on a more ad hoc basis (La Valle *et al.*, 2002a; Statham and Mooney, 2003).

'Flexibility'

The term 'flexibility' was used to cover a number of features of work, ranging from practices such as flexi-time, part-time and term-time working, to aspects of an employer's or organisation's attitude or ethos.

While some parents placed great emphasis on part-time and term-time working, opportunities to work hours that could be varied at short notice (i.e. hours that the parent could change from day to day or week to week, e.g. as part of a flexi-time system) did not emerge as a key concern. This appeared to stem from the fact that most childcare providers required parents to commit to a certain pattern of care in advance, which did not allow scope for spontaneous change in response to variable working hours; it was notable that informal, as well as formal, providers, though more flexible in general, typically required or preferred a regular arrangement, especially if they needed to fit childcare around their other commitments. Therefore, the key thing for lone parents seemed to be knowing in advance how many hours they were required to work and at what times; while the opportunity to rearrange their hours on a spontaneous basis might be a bonus, it was not perceived as something that might enhance the extent to which they were able to coordinate work with the rest of their lives.

Some parents, however, felt that having responsibility for children, particularly as a *lone* parent, meant that certain other sorts of flexibility could be of great benefit to them: these related mainly to the 'approach', 'attitude' or 'ethos' of employers, rather than to formal policies such as variable hours. Unforeseen events, for example, were a big issue for some parents contemplating the prospect of work, who said that they would be unsure about what to do in the case of a child's sickness, either because they anticipated that they would not be paid if they took time off or because they felt that doing so would might create a bad impression with an employer or colleagues (we will come on to describe working lone parents' experiences of dealing with unforeseen events in Chapter 4). In general, parents did not think it would be possible or 'fair' to ask a childcare provider to take care of a sick child, in some cases even if that provider were a relative or friend, and some commented that they would simply not be happy to leave their child when he or she was unwell. While dilemmas associated with these kinds of unforeseen circumstances represented a substantial and genuine worry for some lone parents, ultimately they were probably unlikely to drive decisions about work in general or even about specific jobs. There were exceptions, however, such as one mother of two children

with severe special needs, who expressed the view that her need for this sort of flexibility would make it difficult for her to hold down a job at all.

In terms of attitudes and ethos, a further key concern focused on finding an employer who was 'understanding' and 'sympathetic' to the needs of parents; this encompassed situations such as having to take time off for a sick child, but also extended outwards as a more general way of characterising a relationship between an employer and its employees. Again, such concerns were unlikely to drive decisions about work and jobs, but nevertheless represented a contributing factor in what was considered to be 'suitable' work. Some lone parents did have experience of working for employers they considered to be family-friendly, and others who were contemplating the prospect of work had been encouraged to hear of such examples. For example, one set of focus group participants had a strong awareness of a particular supermarket's good reputation for 'family-friendliness', although it was pointed out that this might mark them out as the exception rather than the rule. And, again, there were some parents who felt that, ultimately, the only employers who might truly see things from their perspective would be schools and childcare settings (although this was overall a less significant 'pull' factor than the availability of school-hours jobs in these environments).

Location of work

Location of work was an important determinant of compatibility for some parents, either on grounds of anticipated difficulties with transport, or owing to the cost and/ or time implications of working far from home, schools or childcare providers. There were cases in which parents reported having rejected a 'better' job than the one they were doing on ground of location. Other parents were simply resistant to travelling too far to work on grounds of nervousness, low confidence, or a desire to ease the transition into work by remaining on familiar territory. A few parents mentioned the advantages of being able to work in very close proximity to a childcare provider (e.g. a workplace/students' crèche); this was usually associated with a reluctance to leave the child, issues around trust and safety, or a desire to be able to get to the child quickly in an emergency.

Few parents in the sample worked from home and, in general, the perception seemed to be that, in spite of the compatibility advantages of homeworking, many of the other potential benefits of working – social aspects, a feeling of independence, etc. – were specifically associated with going outside the home to work. One lone mother who ran her own ironing business from home described how she did not really perceive herself as a 'worker', with all the feelings of pride and self-esteem she associated with having been out to work in the past, let alone as the owner/manager of a business.

3.2.2 'Suitable' childcare

In order for a work-childcare combination to be truly suitable, both work **and** childcare must fulfil the criteria of being available, obtainable, desirable and capable of being coordinated with other aspects of family life. The key determinants of

childcare suitability are discussed in this section, beginning with the 'principled' factors discussed in Chapter 2, and then expanding the discussion to incorporate a range of more 'pragmatic' factors that can influence lone parents' decisions about whether to work.

Type and appropriateness of care

We saw in Chapter 2 how some parents have very deeply embedded preferences towards parental and various types of non-parental childcare, while others have a strong commitment to the benefits of formal care. Some parents also prefer to use a combination of the two. It is clear, therefore, that accordance with parents' – and, in some cases, children's – preferences represents one important aspect of childcare 'suitability'.

It is also worth acknowledging that preferences for different types of childcare may come with qualifiers about children's ages and life stages or may change over time as a result of a child's development. We have already mentioned the emphasis some lone parents placed on being sensitive towards children's individual characteristics, pace of development and 'readiness'. Therefore, 'appropriateness' should also be recognised as a key element of childcare suitability.

Trust, safety and quality

Again, as we saw in Chapter 2, trust and safety were at the forefront of parents' minds when forming a concept of suitable childcare, as were a sense of 'identifying with' or 'sharing values' with childcare providers. The evidence presented in the last chapter also illustrated a range of additional elements underlying parents' notions of what made a '*good*' or '*high quality*' childcare provider, including: qualifications and accreditation, experience (especially as a parent) and being genuinely interested in or focused on children.

Other aspects of quality, not primarily concerned with staff, included cleanliness, hygiene, the provision of a variety of high quality facilities and the ability to engage children in stimulating and enjoyable activities. Parents expressed a range of views about the nature of such activities, which varied according to the age of their children and their preferences for childcare that was more or less educational in content.

Cost

Cost was, for some parents, one of the most important factors in determining the suitability of childcare. We have already made reference to a subset of parents who felt that childcare had to be free to be feasible, while others were prepared to pay for childcare but had found it difficult to find a provider they could afford. In some cases, parents were concerned not only with the regular costs of childcare, but with extra costs they might incur, for example, if they were required to use extra childcare for some unforeseen reason, or were charged because they were late picking the child up from a provider. Some parents' perceived difficulties related to paying for

childcare were associated with a lack of awareness of local provision, an assumption that some or all formal childcare was '*not for them*' or a lack of knowledge or understanding of the financial support available to help families with their childcare costs. In others, parents who felt they could not afford to pay for childcare were quite well-informed and several commented that, while the childcare element of the WTC might be very helpful, a parent still needed to find both a relatively well-paid job and a relatively low-cost childcare provider in order to make ends meet (and both of these were commonly seen as difficult to achieve).

Availability and accessibility

Some parents who were aware of affordable, good quality childcare in their area had nevertheless experienced or anticipated experiencing difficulties finding a suitable work-childcare combination owing to problems of availability. Some providers, particularly the affordable ones, were believed to be full, while others applied restrictive criteria to their intake such as catchment schools or areas; all these problems were especially associated with out-of-school and holiday provision. Parents described long waiting lists (particularly for day care), stressful periods of uncertainty and a feeling that they were under pressure to '*get in first*' to secure a place, and all these things were, of course, compounded if the availability of childcare was a crucial factor in enabling a parent to work.

Another aspect of availability that can act as a barrier to finding a suitable work-childcare combination concerns the hours, days and times at which childcare is available. We have already mentioned that parents who were required to undertake shift work or work at night tended to assume that informal care was their only option; some student parents also mentioned the difficulty of finding childcare to cover evening lectures. Childcare at atypical hours does not even seem to be readily available to parents who work in industries where night or shift working is the norm: one lone shift-working mother, for example, who worked for the Ambulance Service described how she had access to an NHS crèche but it closed at 6pm. Few parents talked about weekend work but, where they did, the problems were much the same.

It is also worth noting, however, that parents' views about what represented suitable childcare varied according to the hours at which it was needed. For example, while some parents would certainly have found weekend, early morning and/or early evening care helpful (some expressing a wish for care as early as 6am or as late as 7pm), some were reluctant to consider using formal childcare late in the evening or at night. As mentioned previously, this may indicate a genuine preference for informal care at such times, or could suggest that any formal care provided at such times would have to be of particular types, for example based in the home.

A third element of availability is flexibility. Overall, parents were pessimistic about the chances of finding childcare to cover short-term or ad hoc needs such as school holidays, INSET days, irregular appointments or sickness. Again, in some cases, informal childcare was perceived as the only type of provision that could meet these

requirements. Parents' concerns about finding flexible work were also mirrored in their requirements for flexible childcare, yielding questions such as: 'will the provider take my child if he or she is sick?' and 'what will happen to my child if I get held up at work?'. Flexible childcare was also interpreted by some parents as childcare which did not require a regular or up-front commitment, e.g. a 'drop-in' out-of-school club or a childminder who was happy to agree hours of care at relatively short-notice. Some parents reported having to commit to, and usually pay for, childcare well in advance, either because places were limited or because it was the provider's protocol; for some, this meant that the benefits of flexible working were effectively neutralised because taking time off work to spend with their child would come at the cost of paying for unused care.

Finally, the role of accessibility in defining suitable childcare again mirrored parents' concerns about locations of work. In some cases, accessibility primarily referred to location – being near home, work or siblings' schools/childcare providers – while, in others, it was focused on transport arrangements and the time and cost implications of these.

3.3   Managing the transition into work

In Section 3.2, we looked at the criteria determining what constitutes a 'suitable' work-childcare combination for lone parents, and the extent to which it seems possible for them to find jobs and childcare provision to fit. In this section, we focus on an additional set of challenges facing lone parents who want to work, this time related to the logistics or 'mechanics' of (re-) entering the labour market.

3.3.1   The sequence of arrangements – 'chicken or egg?'

One theme that came out strongly from discussions with lone parents who had decided to (re-)enter work was the sequence in which arrangements should or could be made, primarily whether it was better to find a job first and then look for childcare to 'suit' the job, or vice versa. Parents had different views on this question, rooted in a variety of considerations and concerns. For example, some parents said they had found or would need to find a job first so that they knew what they would be earning and therefore what they could afford to pay for childcare, while others said they would only feel comfortable accepting a job once they could be sure their earnings would definitely cover their outgoings, including childcare costs. Similarly, while some parents said they had found or would need to find a job that fitted around the hours for which they could secure childcare, others said that they would need to know their working hours before they knew what childcare to look for.

The problem here concerns the *knowledge* parents need, at a particular point in time, in order to be able to judge whether any given job or childcare provider is suitable for them. Acquiring the necessary knowledge about work and childcare all at the right time can be particularly difficult owing to wide variations in the length of time it can take to find employment and satisfactory care. In practice, therefore, the ways in which lone parents overcome this 'chicken or egg?' dilemma – particularly

where substantive support, such as informal childcare provision, is not available to them – appear to be somewhat arbitrary, reliant on luck and often involving an element of risk. One lone mother, for example, described how she had put her daughter's name down on a nursery waiting list with no idea how she would pay for a place and then, when a place was offered a year later, went along to the Jobcentre and requested that they find her a job that would pay for the nursery. In other cases, parents described having to find a childcare provider very quickly – within as little as a few days – following a job offer; this was more a feature of lower-paid work than of professional jobs. Similarly, some parents had been forced to find suitable work in a hurry when a specific paid childcare opportunity arose, owing to the fact that neither earnings nor the childcare element of the WTC would be available to them until *after* they had started work. In view of the complex criteria that can determine the suitability of both work and childcare, it is perhaps no surprise that additional time pressure in either direction tended to cause parents a considerable amount of stress.

3.3.2   A financial 'gap'?

Another cause of concern to lone parents was the financial transition involved in (re-) entering work. We have already mentioned that letting go of the '*security*' of being on benefits can appear daunting, perhaps particularly to lone parents, who in most cases shoulder the financial burdens of the family alone. Several parents also mentioned the fact that they would not be paid for up to a month after starting a job and were therefore worried about how they would pay for childcare and other things during that first month.

Aside from the fact that a claim for WTC cannot be made until seven days before a parent is due to start work, the length of time it took for such a claim to be processed was an issue for some parents. Some working parents described cases in which childcare providers had been prepared to wait for payment until a claim had come through, but the perception was that this was very much a favour or goodwill gesture, rather than standard practice. Parents who had experienced difficulties relating to receipt of benefits and credits in the past were sometimes pessimistic about how smoothly the financial transition would run and/or worried about whether the information they had received about their entitlements had been correct.

A related point here concerns parents who expressed a preference not to enter work until their children had been given a chance to '*settle*' into their new childcare arrangements, thereby implying a period of time during which the parent would be paying for childcare but not earning money through work or – crucially - receiving money to pay for the childcare through the WTC. Responses to this desire ranged from one parent who said she had deliberately arranged to start her job a week after her child was due to start attending the provider, to others who said they would not even be happy to accept a job until their children had '*settled*', in case they needed to take the children out of the setting altogether and look for something else.

3.3.3   Worries and concerns

The period of transition into work can be a very stressful time for lone parents. The complexity of finding a suitable work-childcare combination – particularly given the 'chicken and egg' question of which to look for or commit to first – as well as worries stemming from the financial transition involved can lead to a heavy practical and intellectual burden. In addition, many parents emphasised the emotional aspects of the transition: worries about feeling tired, for example, or over-burdened, or about coping with the demands and '*discipline*' of work. Parents with low confidence or self-esteem were likely to be particularly anxious around this time. It was also clear that, in some cases, it was not possible for parents to know, at the point of entry, whether a job would ultimately prove suitable for them or not, and therefore some concerns were related to potential coordination and flexibility problems, arising, for example, from a need to take time off for a child's sickness or other unforeseen event. In some cases, parents described having entered work without any '*emergency back-up*' arrangements in place. Parents also described concerns relating to their children during the transition into work. Some were preparing to leave their children for the first time in their lives, and were thus having to cope with their own feelings about the prospect of time apart, often including some guilt about leaving them, as well as worries about how the children would settle into their new settings and routines.

Some of the non-working lone parents we spoke to had been so concerned about the difficulties associated with combining paid work with other aspects of their lives, particularly during the transitional period, that that these had played a significant part in their decision not to work. Parents who were orientated towards working, either for financial reasons of because of other perceived benefits of working, were more likely to have overcome such barriers, as were those who were offered informal childcare.

3.3.4   The need for support

The complex and multifaceted nature of the transition into work can lead to a demand for considerable support during the transitional period. The 'chicken and egg' problem related to securing suitable work and childcare, as well as concerns around a 'financial gap' and potential flexibility issues in the early stages of work, are just some of the reasons why some lone parents seek to ease the transition by turning to family and friends. In some cases, this support is mainly emotional: one parent, for example, described how her mother's reassurances had made a big difference during the nerve-wrecking period when she was attempting to secure suitable work and childcare:

> '*I was panicking a bit because I didn't get a childminder till quite late on…and I did worry cos I kept thinking: 'well, if I don't get one, I can't go back to work', but my mum just kept saying to me: 'look, don't worry about it, we'll sort it out.''*

> (lone mother of seven-year-old, worker)

In cases where parents are required to enter work at short notice, are not in a position to pay for childcare as soon as they start work or require more time to find suitable childcare, support in the form of actual offers of informal care (even if only as a '*back-up*' in case other arrangements fail) can also be invaluable.

Though such cases were not typical, there was some evidence that parents were sometimes receiving substantive support from sources other than family and friends. Understanding childcare providers, particularly those who were prepared to wait for payment, were credited with a role in easing the transition for some parents. In exceptional cases, employers had also shown a willingness to help: one lone mother, for example, who had accepted a job before finding suitable childcare, described how her employer had encouraged her to go away and sort everything out and then come back to them to agree a start date. In that case, an NDLP adviser had been involved in arranging both employment and childcare, which may partly have explained the employer's collaborative approach. Perhaps surprisingly, however, there was little overall evidence of NDLP advisers playing a significant supporting role during the transition into work, the emphasis of the relationship for most lone parents being focused on the job-seeking process.

3.4   Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the more pragmatic factors – over and above lone parents' views and beliefs – which influence their decisions about (re-)entering paid work, as well as the factors that contribute to finding a 'suitable' work-childcare combination. In the final section, we also focused in on the unique pressures and challenges associated with the period of transition into work.

3.4.1   Factors influencing a decision about work

We classified the main factors that contribute to a lone parent's decision about whether to (re-)enter work into the three broad categories of:

- 'financial';
- 'parent-centred';
- 'child-centred'.

Ultimately, every decision about whether to (re-)enter the labour market will involve striking some sort of balance between these three types of consideration.

Consideration of financial factors can serve to weaken or strengthen a parent's work orientation. For example, a parent who has, or perceives themself to have, low earnings potential may develop a weaker work orientation on the basis of a belief that work would not be financially worthwhile, whereas a parent who recognises a link between paid work and potential financial benefit is likely to experience the opposite effect. The same 'double potential' was observed to stem from consideration of a range of specific financial issues, including receipt of Income Support (while

some parents were reluctant to let go of the *'security'* of benefits, others were keen to escape the stigma or guilt associated with receiving them) and home ownership (while some parents worried about their mortgages being put into jeopardy if they entered work, others cited the need to keep paying the mortgage as a key reason to remain in work). In addition, there was evidence that specific forms of financial support could play a key role in shaping a decision about work. The childcare element of the WTC had made a clear difference to some parents, particularly those who placed high value on the possibility of working part-time. For other parents, financial support for education or training was seen as key, and there was a feeling that lone parents ought to be supported in taking a long-term approach or developing a career, rather than just encouraged to get *'any job'* to *'get by'*.

The category of 'parent-centred' factors covered a wide range of issues, which, again, might have either a positive or negative effect on work orientation. On the positive side, we considered parents' roles as workers as an element of personal identity, as well as having the potential to provide opportunities for socialisation, to prevent isolation, boredom and depression, and to increase feelings of self-esteem and independence. At the opposite end of the scale, we also considered a range of parent-centred reasons for resisting work such as a lack of confidence, a perceived lack of skills, qualifications or experience, a lack of motivation (perhaps after a long break from the labour market) or a feeling that managing paid work alongside all the other responsibilities of being a lone parent would simply be *'too much'*. In the case of the latter, we noted that this sense of being 'overwhelmed' was sometimes reported by parents who were nevertheless highly work-orientated, suggesting that efforts to reduce this burden, and to reassure and support this group, could have a beneficial effect.

Many of the 'child-centred' factors that can influence lone parents' decisions about work were discussed in detail in Chapter 2, in the context of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of different forms of childcare. In this chapter, we focused on the ways in which a child's age or life stage can influence the effects of child-centred considerations on a parent's decisions about working. Parents' varying views about the 'appropriateness' of different types of childcare for children of different ages had sometimes led them to identify a particular point in time at which it might be feasible for them to consider (re-)entering work. It was common for parents – particularly if they were also concerned about the cost and/or availability of pre-school childcare – to put off making a decision about work until the child started full-time school, although concerns about out-of-school care and journeys to and from school could (be perceived to) restrict a parent's choices about work even beyond that point. A child's personality and characteristics also had to be taken into account, all of which indicates that flexibility in childcare provision is key, as age thresholds vary between individual children and families, having developed in response to a range of considerations.

Finally, it is important to recognise that not all parents who (re-)enter work manage to strike a perfectly satisfactory balance between the different factors that influence their decision. Compromises of various kinds were common among the lone parents we spoke to, typically involving, on the one hand, the use of a childcare provider which was seen as less than ideal to fit with the constraints of work, or, on the other, making some sort of career sacrifice in order to be able to secure suitable childcare. There were also cases in which parents felt that compromises had been unavoidable: that working inevitably implied some sort of sacrifice in terms of family life, or that staying at home with the children, for all its advantages, automatically denied the parent – and perhaps the children – the multifarious benefits of work.

3.4.2   The decision process

Having considered the different factors which can influence a lone parent's decision about work, we then went on to consider the shape of the decision process, identifying the four different models of:

• an 'overall calculation';

• a decision taken from a 'partial perspective';

• a 'norms- or perceptions-based' decision;

• a decision that arose as the result of a 'prompt' or 'gateway'.

Those parents who arrived at the decision of whether to (re-)enter work as the result of a systematic calculation tended to be those who had support from friends, family or a professional such as an NDLP adviser, and were typically better informed, often having taken a proactive approach to finding the information they needed. In contrast, other lone parents were categorised as having made their decision on the basis of a 'partial perspective' – that is, by focusing on a single key consideration or subset of considerations, whilst ignoring or postponing others. This was sometimes partly a response to missing information (e.g. what work they would be able to get having completed their training) or because of a sense of being overwhelmed by all the issues that needed to be addressed; a feeling which may have been enhanced by a lack of support from others.

Lone parents whose decision about work was 'norms - or perceptions-based' often did not perceive themselves as having actively made a decision at all; rather they had simply acted in accordance with some perceived norm stemming from family, friends, communities or society more widely. Typically, this was associated with perceptions of whether it was 'right' or 'normal' for parents of young children to work, but it could also involve a concept of feasibility at a very general level, for example the belief that, on the whole, it was not possible for parents to go to work until their children started school.

The study uncovered evidence of a range of events and circumstances that could initiate a lone parent's (re-)entry into the labour market. Some of these – the ones we called 'prompts' – were immediate or short-term in nature: an offer of work or

childcare, for example. Others – the 'gateways' – were more long-term or gradual; opportunities for education or training for example, which could not only equip parents with the necessary skills and qualifications to (re-)enter work, but could also help them in a number of other ways, such as building confidence and self-esteem. Voluntary work also emerged as a key gateway into paid work for a range of reasons, including the sense that it could enable parents to (re-)enter the labour market gradually, involving less pressure or commitment than a paid job. Voluntary work in schools and childcare settings appeared to have been particularly beneficial for some lone parents, as these were seen as safe environments, which would be sympathetic to the needs of parents and where parents already possessed a certain amount of understanding and expertise.

In addition to specific prompts and gateways, the shape of a parent's decision process can be altered by other factors, particularly the provision of information, guidance and support. These were likely to be particularly important for parents who had a sense of being 'overwhelmed' by the prospect of (re-)entering work and had, for this reason, developed a partial or norms-based approach. In such cases, information and support might help them move more towards the 'calculation' model, increasing their chances of identifying an optimal work-childcare solution.

3.4.3   What made the difference?

Whilst acknowledging that the decision of whether to (re-)enter work is always multifaceted and complex, in Section 3.1.4 we went on to draw out some factors which appeared to have been particularly important in helping some lone parents reach their decision. Two government initiatives stood out here: the NDLP and the childcare element of the WTC. The NDLP had clearly been a key factor in enabling some lone parents to (re-)enter work. The 'better-off' calculation and the provision of information on the WTC were cited as key components of the service, but there was also a clear message that relationships with NDLP advisers worked best when they were personalised, holistic and sensitive to an individual parent's situation.

Other key factors were the availability of childcare and the question of whether working would be financially worthwhile. In terms of childcare availability, the availability of **informal** provision stood out as something that commonly made the difference in a lone parent's decision about work. In some cases, this was related to a (perceived) lack of affordable formal childcare in the area, or a wish to avoid the cost of formal care, whereas, in others, it was related to a principled or deeply-embedded preference for informal care. Therefore, it seems reasonable to infer that efforts to tackle misconceptions about formal childcare, as well as to increase its availability and flexibility, would all have a positive effect on encouraging lone parents to (re-)enter work. It is also possible that increased support for informal provision – particularly for those parents who have a strong preference for this sort of care – might have an effect. We will go on to discuss the issue of payment for informal carers, as well as information on formal childcare services, in Chapter 5.

Whatever other concerns lone parents may have had, it was clear that, ultimately, working did have to be 'worth it' in financial terms. For some, this view was associated with perceived disadvantages of working (having less time to spend with children, for example) while, for others, it was linked to a feeling that working without financial gain would not afford them the same benefits in terms of independence or self-esteem. There were exceptions to this rule, however, most notably among parents who saw working in the short-term as part of a longer-term investment, helping them to gain skills or experience which would, eventually, begin to pay off.

3.4.4 Finding a suitable work-childcare combination

Finding a suitable work-childcare combination represents the additional challenge of putting a lone parent's decision to work into practice; moreover, it is important to recognise that, should this prove too problematic, an initial decision to work can ultimately be reversed.

Suitability in terms of both work and childcare can broadly be defined in terms of four key criteria, namely being available, obtainable, desirable and compatible with other aspects of family life. In Section 3.2, we outlined several components of what lone parents saw as suitable work and childcare. As regards work, these were: local employment opportunities; hours, days and times of work; flexibility; and location of work.

Some lone parents perceived local employment opportunities as being limited in general, while others related this explicitly or implicitly to their own (perceived) employability. Parents who had never worked, or who had taken a significant break from the labour market, often felt they would find it more difficult to get a job. Some lone parents even cited instances in which they had felt at a disadvantage in job interviews, for example, owing to employers' perceptions that, as a lone parent, they might be less reliable than other employees. For some parents, however, the issue was less whether they would be able to get a job than whether they would be able to get a job they **wanted**: this could mean a well-paid, interesting or enjoyable job, something that would further their careers, or something that could be easily coordinated with childcare and other aspects of family life. This reinforced the message that, in supporting lone parents to (re-)enter work (through Jobcentre Plus, for example), it is important to recognise both that they may not be prepared to accept '*any job*' and that work cannot be considered in isolation from their other needs and responsibilities.

The study showed a strong desire among lone parents for part-time work, particularly during school hours. School-hours working was considered particularly desirable for a range of reasons, including the opportunity to avoid paying for out-of-school care, or a feeling that out-of-school care made the *'day too long'* for the children. Some parents also expressed a wish to take and/or pick up their children from school personally, and there was evidence that this was particularly likely where children had undergone trauma due to a relationship break-up or bereavement.

In other cases, the desire for school-hours working was wholly or partly parent-centred, insofar as it lessened the challenge of coordinating work and care, which, in turn, reduced the pressure associated with (re-)entering work. Term-time work was also preferred by some lone parents, primarily because it took the pressure off trying to find childcare to cover the school holidays, which some parents described as a *'nightmare'* time.

While the lone parents we spoke to had undertaken part-time work of various kinds, work at atypical times such as nights or shift patterns was little in evidence. This may partly be explained by the absence of 'shift-parenting' arrangements with non-resident parents among our sample, although there were examples of lone parents successfully engaging in 'shift-care' with other informal carers. Furthermore, it is important to note that, while lone parents could benefit hugely from opportunities to work part-time (and, indeed, for some, such opportunities meant the difference between working and not working), they were often not in a position to take advantage of 'flexible' working arrangements in the sense of 'flexi-time' schemes whereby working hours can be altered on an ad hoc or spontaneous basis, largely due to the inflexibility of formal childcare services.

Flexibility in terms of an employer's attitude or ethos was a key concern for many lone parents, especially when associated with unforeseen events such as a child's sickness. Some parents said they would not be able or willing to ask childcare providers to take care of their child if he or she was unwell, and therefore a sympathetic employer could make things a great deal easier at such times. Moreover, while this would not have made the difference between accepting and rejecting a job for most parents, it could do so in some cases, for example if a child had severe special needs.

Finally, location of work was an important concern for some lone parents, either because they anticipated that transport problems could make coordination of work and childcare difficult, or because they preferred to work locally, for example because they were nervous about (re-)entering work or because they wanted to be near their childcare provider(s) in case of an emergency. Although some parents we spoke to were working from home, this was not generally viewed as an ideal solution to the challenge of combining work and care, as it was not perceived to offer all the benefits of going out to work, such as socialisation, stimulation, independence and self-esteem.

The key determinants of suitable childcare for lone parents were identified as type of provision and appropriateness for a child's age and other characteristics, trust and safety, quality, cost, availability and accessibility. Many of these factors were discussed in the context of parents' preferences for different types of formal and informal care in Chapter 2. Appropriateness of care was typically related to a child's age, life stage, personality and characteristics, but was also influenced by parents' beliefs about the role that childcare should play and the extent to which different provider types could fulfil this. As we have already mentioned, trust and safety were

key for parents, as was some sense of 'shared values', for example a feeling that the provider would discipline your child in the same way as you would.

Lone parents assessed the quality of childcare providers along a range of dimensions, including cleanliness and hygiene, the standard of facilities and the provision of stimulating and enjoyable activities. Experienced and competent staff emerged as a key component of quality, with some parents expressing a strong preference for staff who had children of their own. Parents also placed high value on the sense that providers were 'child-focused'; that they were keen, engaged and enthusiastic, and demonstrated a genuine affection and respect for children.

Cost, availability and accessibility were the three key pragmatic factors that determined the suitability of childcare for lone parents. Some parents felt that childcare had to be free to be feasible, while others reported that they had found it difficult to find affordable care, even with the help of the childcare element of the WTC. In some cases, however, a perceived lack of affordable childcare did appear to be related to a lack of information or a general presumption that certain forms of childcare were *'not for me'*; in such cases, there were signs that increased relevant information on childcare options could open up new doors. However, some parents who were aware of good quality, affordable childcare in their areas reported difficulties getting a place; this was particularly associated with day nurseries, as well as out-of-school and holiday care. Moreover, where places were available, care was often not offered for a sufficient number of hours or at the times that would best enable lone parents to work. Flexibility was also an issue: parents were concerned about what might happen if their child was sick or if they were late to pick him or her up at the end of the day. On the other side, the fact that formal providers commonly required parents to commit to (and sometimes pay for) a certain pattern of care in advance could prevent them from taking full advantage of flexible working arrangements.

3.4.5   Managing the transition into work

The complex and multifarious challenges facing lone parents in coming to a decision about whether to work and putting a decision to work into practice emerged clearly from the study. In the final section of this chapter, we focused in on the period of transition into work; a time which tended to emerged as particularly stressful and demanding.

One key finding here was that parents are often effectively required to sort out their work and childcare arrangements simultaneously in order to ensure that the two will fit together, both financially (i.e. the job will pay enough to fund the childcare / the childcare will be affordable given the pay) and in terms of coordination (time, location, transport, etc.). Of course, it is very rarely possible to synchronise these exactly, and therefore, in practice, parents were typically put in the position of having to commit to one side of the equation and simply hope for the best. Naturally, this increased the level of stress associated with making the transition into work, with parents sometimes rushing around to secure jobs or childcare in a matter of

weeks or even days. The message here seemed clear: the transition into work could be made a great deal easier if parents were supported to the extent that they were able to secure one thing (either work or childcare) first, and take a reasonable amount of time after that to secure the other.

Some lone parents associated the transition into work with worries and concerns of a financial nature. These included leaving the *'security'* of benefits, being solely responsible for the household's finances and concerns about how smoothly the transition into their new financial arrangements would run (for example, whether their WTC would come through on time). One particular worry here concerned the perception that there would be a financial 'gap' associated with moving into work, while parents waited for their first pay packet to come through. In some cases, this related back to the issue of sorting out work and childcare simultaneously. Parents who were relying on the childcare element of the WTC were concerned about how they would pay for childcare in the first phase of working and, while there were some examples of childcare providers deferring payment during this period, this was very much seen as a lucky exception to the rule. In addition, there were some parents who expressed a desire not to start a job until they had been able to observe their child settling into a new childcare setting which, inevitably, had the potential to widen this financial gap even further.

It is clear that the transition into work can involve a wide range of worries and concerns, financial, practical and emotional, concerning both parents and children, and encompassing both short-term and longer-term issues. For this reason, support from family and friends can be crucial, with 'back-up' informal care often playing a key role. For some parents, however, particularly those without family and other social networks to call on, support from other sources such as the NDLP can also be vitally important at this time. Evidence on the extent to which NDLP advisers had provided adequate support in the transitional period varied among our respondents: while some described the service as mainly focused on the job-seeking process, others were more positive, with one paradigm case in which a three-way collaboration between the parent, the adviser and the prospective employer had resulted in a situation where the employer had told the parent to go away and find suitable childcare, before coming back to agree a start date that was most convenient to her.

4 Lone parents' experiences of managing paid work, childcare and education

Chapter 4 builds on Chapters 2 and 3 by exploring lone parents' experiences of managing and coordinating work, childcare and school education after their work and childcare decisions have been made and they have taken up paid work. It is important to consider these experiences in-depth, as little is known about how parents - especially lone parents - actually manage their arrangements for coordinating work-time with childcare and education time in practice, to ensure continuity of children's care. In this chapter, therefore, we aim to cast some light on the nature of these practical arrangements and the ways in which they are managed by lone parents. We will explore how children's and parents' travel arrangements are coordinated to ensure everyone arrives at their respective destinations on time; the degree of complexity involved in coordinating these journeys; and the extent to which support from others is used to help with both transport and the coordination of care arrangements (which can include more than just providing childcare). We will also consider the nature of lone parents' negotiations with employers and childcare providers (especially grandparents) in relation to the coordination of childcare and work. The main aim of the chapter is to find out what works well and less well in managing coordination, the factors that are involved in this, and the strategies that can help lone parents overcome any difficulties.

The chapter begins, in Section 4.1, with a brief description of children's and parents' travel arrangements to and from childcare, education and work. Using four case studies, we describe in detail the level of complexity involved in managing these arrangements. In Section 4.2, we describe some of the ways in which lone parents tried to simplify their coordination arrangements and identify some of the strategies they adopted (or wanted to adopt) to achieve this. We also show how parents managed arrangements for school holidays and other ad hoc events (such as when a child gets ill). Finally, in Section 4.3, we consider how lone parents negotiated

agreements with employers and childcare providers to achieve effective coordination of work and childcare.

4.1 Practical arrangements made by working lone parents to coordinate work, childcare and education in a typical week

The working lone parents we spoke to for this study used a number of different transport arrangements. While some parents of older children travelled to work separately, leaving the children to make their way to their destinations independently, other families' arrangements involved parents travelling to schools and care settings with the children or making use of additional support from one or more additional sources. Moreover, arrangements could be different at the start and end of the day: some parents, for example, took their children to childcare/school in the mornings themselves, but arranged for someone else to pick them up and/or care for them until the parent finished work – others did the same thing in reverse. In some cases, the support parents received with transporting their children between home, school and childcare settings came from sources which were not perceived as providing 'childcare' as such, while in others, those who transported children also provided care. The carers involved in transporting children included grandparents, other family members, friends, out-of-school clubs (for journeys to and from school) and childminders. Family members played a particularly important role here. Non-resident fathers were mentioned by some lone parents, although it was uncommon for them to be described as taking an active part in transporting children or providing childcare (as distinct from 'having contact' with the children).

Where parents worked at home, either running a childminding business or other kind of business, they generally did not use help from others in transporting children. Similarly, where parents worked school hours or lived close to the formal childcare used, they tended to transport the children to and from school/childcare themselves. In such circumstances, it appeared that coordinating work and care was fairly straightforward. Where parents used support from others with children's transport, coordination seemed more complex, with the key determinants of this complexity being the timing of the parent's working day and their travel time to work.

4.1.1 Full-time working lone parents

To begin to answer the question of what works well or less well in coordinating work and childcare/education in a typical working week, we will examine four of the most complex sets of arrangements in detail. Two of the case studies involve parents who worked full-time and two involve those who worked part-time. Full-time work is defined as 30 or more hours per week and part-time as fewer than 30 hours.

Case Study One

Case Study One describes a lone father of a son aged nine years who worked full-time, from 7am to 5pm, Monday to Thursday. He received a mix of support with childcare and transport from an out-of-school club and his son's grandmother. The ways in which this support was coordinated with the father's work commitments is illustrated in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 **Case study one: mix of family help and out-of-school support with coordinating work, childcare and education for lone father working full-time (7am – 5pm, Monday to Thursday)**

Start/Finish

Child's home

(45 mins)

Grandmother's home

Lone father's work

Out-of school club

Grandmother's work

9 year old child's school

Key

Afternoon journeys

Morning journeys

Lone father of nine-year-old
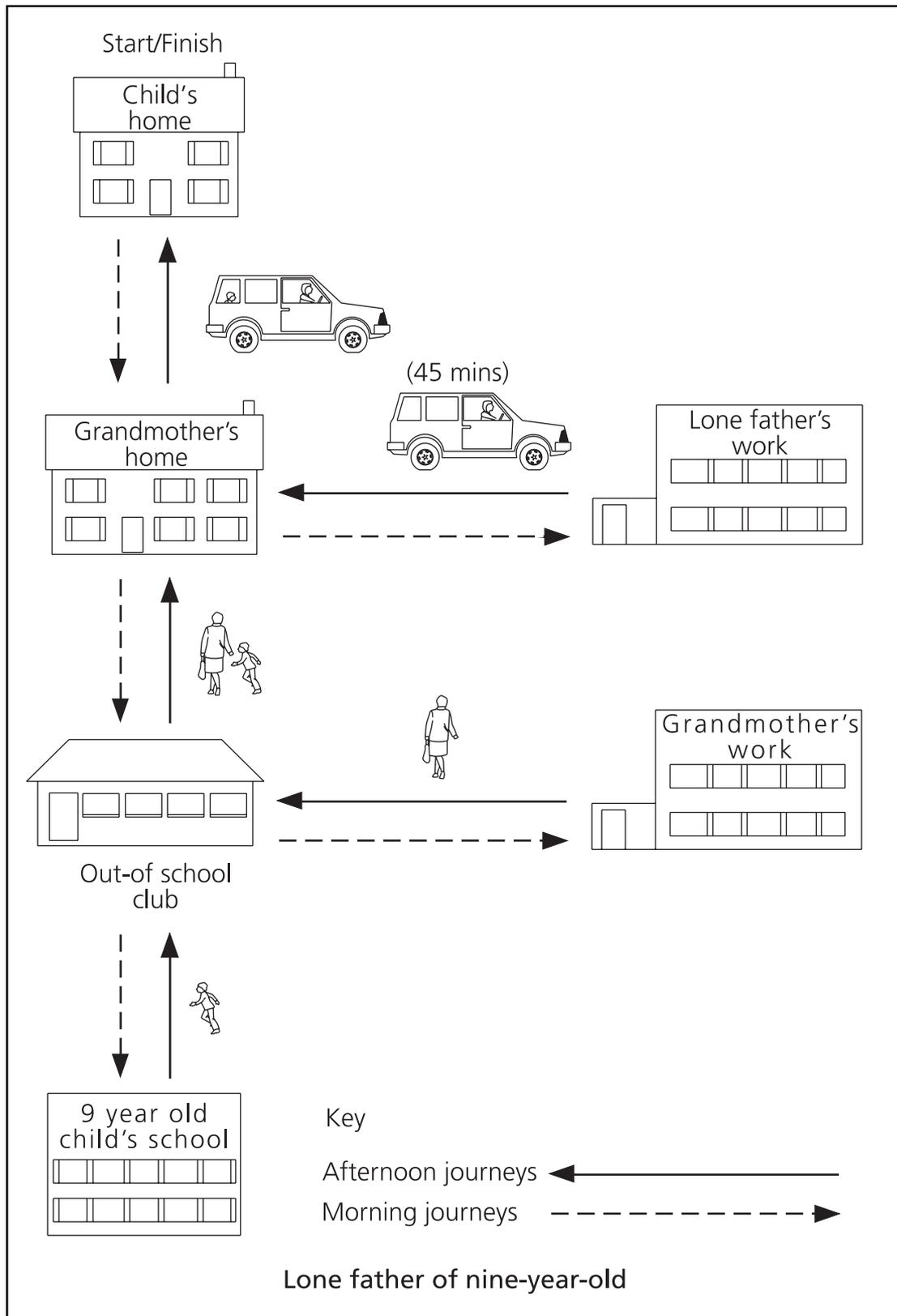
Figure 4.1 shows that the father left home in the mornings and travelled by car to the grandmother's house, leaving his nine-year-old son there at 6.15am before travelling to work 45 minutes away (to start work at 7am). The grandmother cared for the son and walked him to the out-of-school club that opened at 8am, before travelling to her own place of work. The out-of-school club took care of the child for an hour before walking him over to the school close by. These arrangements were then repeated in reverse at the end of the day. The main reasons for this pattern of support were the father's working hours and the distance he had to travel to work. This meant his childcare and travel needs extended beyond the opening times of the out-of-school club (8am to 5.30pm). Thus, the grandmother provided care wrapped around the out-of-school club opening hours.

In effect, this lone father was using two forms of wraparound care, because his son needed to be transported between care settings (the grandmother's house and the out-of-school club) **and** his home **and** his school. The key elements that made this possible were the proximity of the father's home to the grandmother's home; the proximity of the grandmother's home to the out-of-school club; and the father having use of a car, which facilitated travel to the grandmother's house and to his place of work. This case is a good illustration of how a relatively long distance to work (45 minute drive) was managed.

Whilst the lone father felt that these arrangements did work, he was not entirely satisfied. On the one hand, he relied heavily on the out-of-school club, to the extent that he jokingly said that he would *'commit suicide'* if it were not available and – on a more serious note – that he would have to consider giving up work. On the other hand, the out-of-school club opened at 8am – too late to meet his childcare needs fully – and he relied on help from the grandmother to manage this inconvenience. The lone father was also unhappy that his son had to get up at quarter to six in the morning, as he worried that he might be tired at school and '*miss out*' on his education. Ideally, he would have preferred a home carer to look after his son and take him to and from school. This father did, however, appear resigned to matters and believed there was little he could do to improve things. As he described it:

> *'You Yeah, it'll do for now basically, you know it wasn't gonna be a permanent thing but I mean as it goes [son] is happy with it. I mean to start with, you know, I don't think anybody was really happy with the situation but, you know these things come along and you've just gotta get on with them, you know you can't, you've got no choice, you've just gotta go with the flow.'*

(lone father of nine-year-old, worker)

The father was also dissatisfied with his working hours: he complained of tiredness and felt he had little time to spend with his son at the end of the day. This time together in the evenings was perceived as very precious, as the father believed when his son got older he would see even less of him, before he eventually left home in adulthood. He said:

> 'because never really get any time together because even our home time I've gotta like do a meal, clean up after the meal and then get [son's] things for the next day, get my sandwiches for the next day. So by the time I've come back from work and all this has been done – 'Right mate get your pyjamas on'…In a few years' time when he's older that'll change because he, he won't; be going to bed so early. But then he's gonna have friends – 'oh I'm going out, so and so,' and he's gone. And before you know it he'll be leaving home, so.'

(lone father of nine-year-old, worker)

Whilst tiredness might be a feature of all working parents' lives, for this lone father, the fact that he could not share the domestic chores with another adult in the evenings seemed to create extra time pressure. Ideally he said he would prefer to change his hours of work to 8am to 4.30pm and '*earn enough to keep us'.* He had already altered his working hours to fit in with his child's needs when he became a lone parent, reducing them from 60 to 38 per week and changing from regular night shifts to day shifts over four days Monday to Thursday. It appeared that his decision to concentrate his work into four long 10-hour days had represented an attempt to resolve the competing demands of work, housework and spending time with his son at weekends, as he said:

> 'I can't fault my employer at all because it's like I say they have made the offer, i.e. you can come and go as you please, as long as you complete your hours and you get your work done. But you know what you gain in some ways you lose in others. And it's what's important to you. And that, like I say that Friday it means so much because then me and [son] have got a weekend together. If I go, when I go in on the Friday all the housework's left so then I'll have to do it Saturday so we've only got one day together.'

(lone father of nine-year-old, worker)

Despite this degree of flexibility over his working hours, there were some common elements between this father's arrangements and the second case study of complex coordination, which involved no flexibility over working hours and shift working.

Case Study Two

The second case study of a full-time worker involves a lone mother who had a five-year-old daughter. She worked a rolling shift pattern involving early morning starts, late evening finishes, long twelve-hour days and night shifts. This lone mother resided with her daughter in the grandparent's house and relied solely on family members for support to coordinate her work and childcare effectively (it is not possible to illustrate her coordination arrangements diagrammatically as they changed weekly in response to her shift pattern). The grandmother was involved in

providing childcare, especially in the evenings and at weekends when the mother worked, but she did not help transport the child to and from school: the sister-in-law did this and sometimes provided wraparound care at the same time. For example, when the mother worked long days during the school week (from 6.30am to 8pm), she left home and drove her daughter to the sister-in-law's house (five minutes away) leaving her there at 6am and picking her up again in the evening at 8pm. The sister-in-law then cared for the child at either end of the school day and transported her to and from school. When the mother worked a late shift (starting late morning but still finishing at 8pm) the sister-in-law picked up the child from school, but in this instance she would not care for her as well. Rather she took the child straight home to the grandmother's house where she was cared for until the mother finished work.

The key elements involved in coordinating work, childcare and education in this second case study were the co-residence of mother, child and grandmother; the proximity of the grandmother's house to the sister-in-law's house; the proximity of both houses to the child's school; and – perhaps less importantly – the mother's use of a car to travel to the sister-in-law's house and to work. Travel-to-work time did not need to be accommodated in coordination arrangements in this family, but the mother's shift hours did.

Despite the complexity of her arrangements, this lone mother said she was satisfied and things were '*easy enough*' to manage. Her main carer, the sister-in-law, was also said to be '*happy*'. But, in fact, the mother was not entirely satisfied: like the lone father in Case Study One, she said she often felt tired and expressed a desire to change her working hours to work just two days a week. She said:

> '*Obviously the disadvantages are that I don't get to see her as often as other parents do. You know a lot of the time I'm tired. When she wants to do certain things I've just done a 12 - hour shift and you know it sort of gets tiring.*'

(lone mother of five-year-old, worker)

These two case studies of full-time workers with complex coordination arrangements share some common characteristics. Both parents regularly started work early in the morning (pre-8am) and arrived home from work late in the evenings. For the lone mother, this related to her shift patterns, whereas in the case of the lone father, it reflected a 45-minute journey to and from work and a 10-hour working day. In both cases, the working day extended beyond both the school day and the opening hours of out-of-school clubs. This resulted in the need for a complex set of transport and childcare arrangements and, in particular, for very flexible childcare support from family members. Whilst both parents felt their arrangements worked fairly well, they were not entirely satisfied and both expressed a desire to change their working hours. The desire to change working hours seemed to extend beyond concerns about the practicalities of coordination, however, with the lone parents' own tiredness or that of the children being an important feature. The lone father, especially, felt under time pressure in the evenings, when the work involved in doing domestic chores left him with little time to spend with his son.

4.1.2   Part-time working lone parents

Case Studies Three and Four present the most complex coordination arrangements found among the part-time working lone parents we spoke to.

Case Study Three

Case Study Three involves a lone mother who had one son aged three years. She worked unpredictable hours as a supply teacher and did not always know in advance whether she would work at all in some weeks, or what hours or days she might be required to work. She usually received work offers from the Local Education Authority on Monday mornings and had to make childcare and travel plans at the last minute to fit with work commitments. The key people involved in providing support with childcare and transport were the grandmother and the child's father. The father came to the lone mother's home to care for the child there. This family's arrangements are illustrated in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2   Case Study Three: informal help with coordinating work, childcare and education for lone mother working part-time (irregular days)

Start/Finish

Father's home

Child's home

Grandmother's home

Mother's work

Grandmother's car

Early education school nursery

Key

Morning journey - Monday   – – – ▶

Afternoon journey - Monday   ———▶

Morning journey - other days   – – – ▶

Afternoon journey - other days ———▶

Lone mother of three-year-old
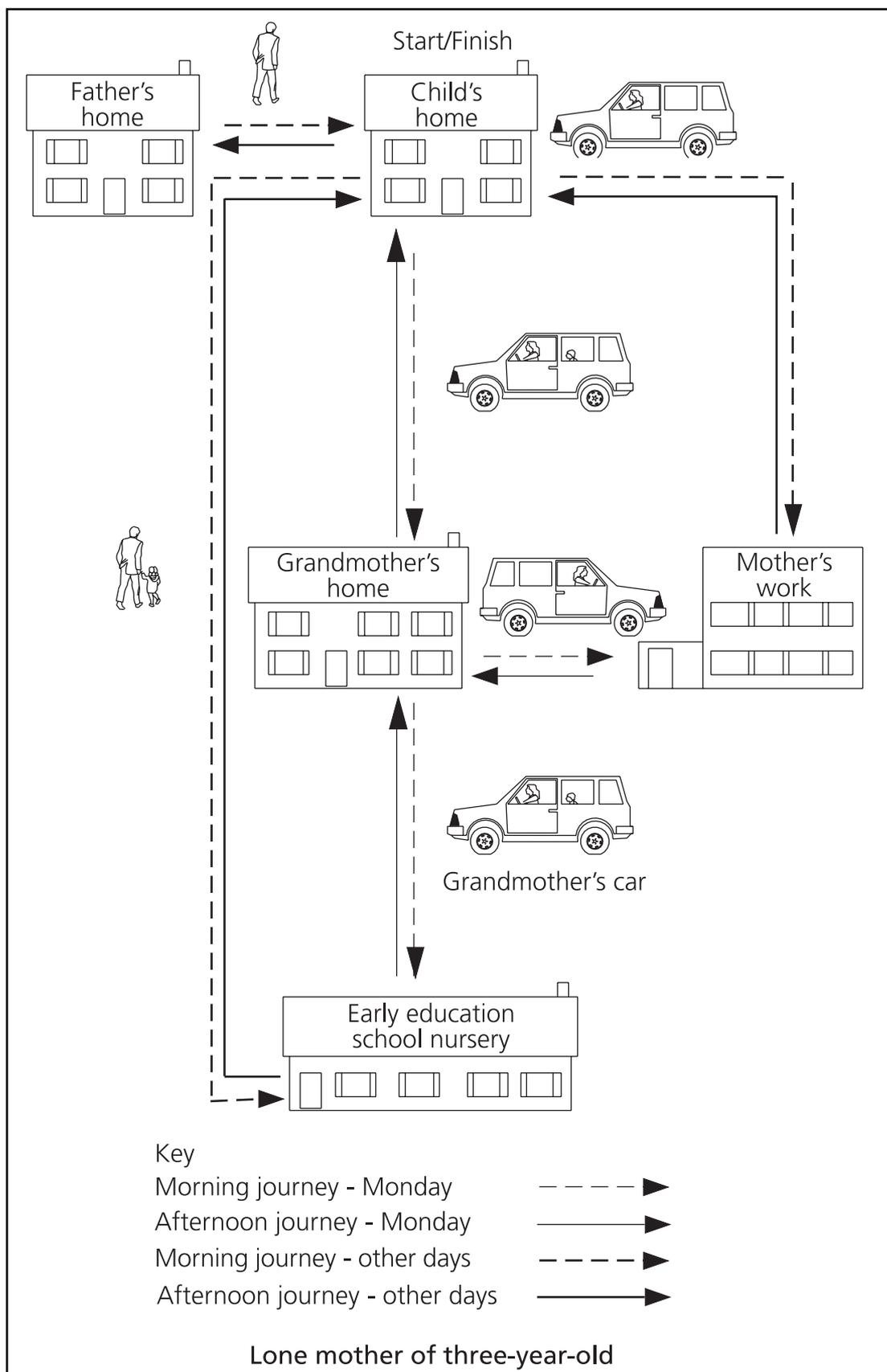
Figure 4.2 shows how the son was transported from his home to the grandmother's to stay overnight on Sundays and throughout the day on Mondays. On Mondays, the grandmother cared for the son and took him to and from early-education in a school nursery about fifteen minutes drive away. This substantial and regular support from the grandmother allowed the mother to respond quickly to work offers made on Monday mornings, without worrying about any of her son's childcare needs or about coordinating childcare with her own work commitments. On other days of the week (if the mother was working), the child's father would offer similar support, but he came to the son's home to care for him until the mother finished work. He also walked the son to and from early-education (the father was unemployed).

The key element of coordination in this context of unpredictable employment were the mother's car to travel to the grandmother's house and to work; the grandmother's car to take the son to and from early-education; and the proximity of the father's house to his son's house and to the school nursery. In effect, the father and (to a lesser extent) the grandmother were all 'on standby', waiting to respond to the mother's work situation, and she was heavily reliant on the flexibility of this support to coordinate, work and childcare/education.

In general, the mother thought these arrangements worked well and were even better than they had been in the past, as the grandmother was now retired and no longer caring for a sick relative. She said:

> *'It just seems to work really well at, at the moment anyway, and I can't see anything changing, and especially now my mum's retired, she's got that bit of extra time and my [female relative] died last year so she had her to look after as well before that, so she's now got more time, so it does make sense.'*

(lone mother of three-year-old, worker)

Even so, this mother wanted to change her working hours to work the same three days a week on a predictable basis. This suggests that, as in Case Studies One and Two, she was not entirely satisfied with arrangements, in spite of her assertion that they worked fairly well overall.

Case Study Four

Case Study Four involved a lone mother who had two children aged twelve and nine years. This mother worked regular part-time hours from 9am to 2pm, Monday to Friday. However, despite this regular employment, this mother had multifaceted childcare and transport arrangements similar to those described in Case Study Three, where the parent's employment hours were less predictable. The main reason for this was the mother's relatively long journey to work (45 minutes by car) and the fact that her children attended two different schools. The key people involved in providing childcare and transport support were the children's grandmother and a friend of the lone parent. These arrangements are illustrated in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3   Case Study Four: informal help with coordinating work, childcare and education for lone parent working regularly (9am – 2pm, Monday to Friday)

Start/Finish

Child's home

(45 mins)

12 year old child's school

Friend's home

9 year old child's school

Grandmother's home

(45 mins)

Mother's work

Key

Morning journeys   – – – – ▶
Afternoon journeys   ──────▶

Lone mother of two children aged twelve and nine years
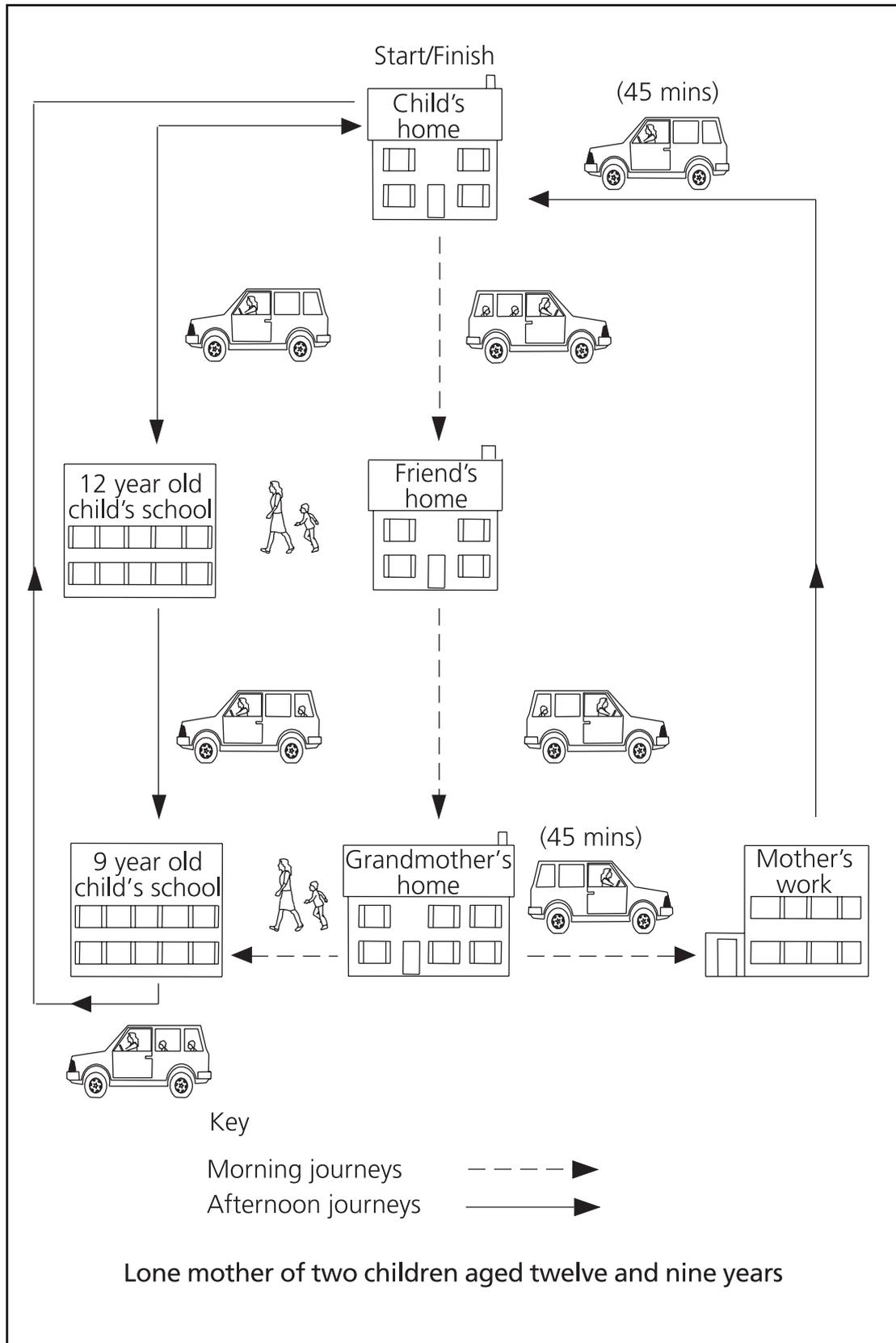
Figure 4.3 shows how this lone mother travelled from home in the mornings by car, to her friend's house where she left her oldest child. She then travelled to the grandmother's house and left the youngest child before proceeding to work, a 45 minute drive away. The friend and the grandmother cared for the children separately before walking them to their respective schools (one secondary and one primary). At the end of the working day (finishing at 2pm), the mother usually returned home before travelling by car to pick up the children from their different schools.

The key element in this context of predictable part-time employment was the proximity of both carers' houses to the children's different schools. The mother's car was also important for transporting the children to and from their different care/education settings as well as for taking herself to work. As in the other three case studies, this mother believed things worked well. However, despite her apparent satisfaction, she was planning to move house to be nearer to her children's schools. She said this would make things a '*lot easier*': not only would the family be nearer to the school, but it would also shorten her own journey to work. In fact, it would mean that she could use public transport instead of her car, which had recently become a matter of importance, as her employer had decided to withdraw car parking at her place of work. She said that, without the car, she would have had to get two buses to work from her current home, which would have taken over an hour each way. She explained that, under these circumstances, she would have been unable to drop the children off at the grandmother's and friend's houses, and that, ultimately, this would have made it difficult for her to sustain her employment. This case study illustrates, therefore, how both proximity to work and schools/care settings, as well as owning a car, can be crucially important for coordinating work and care, even to the point where a parent might not be able to work without them.

4.1.3   Conclusions from the case studies

Across the four case studies, the problems parents faced with coordination varied and were caused by a range of factors, including: long working days, relatively long travel times to work (45 minutes by car), shift work, unpredictable work and children in the same family attending different schools. Yet, despite these differences, the parents adopted similar approaches to ensure arrangements were coordinated effectively. Table 4.4 presents the nature of these lone parents' coordination difficulties, how they were managed in practice, and the parents' desired strategies for resolving them in the future.

Table 4.4   Practical arrangements for resolving coordination complexity among four examples of working lone parents

Case studies	Coordination problems	How coordination problems managed	Desired future options
Case Study 1: Lone father works full-time 8am-7pm	- Starts work early (7am) - Long working days - No OSC* until 8am - 45 minute drive to work	- Used two forms of childcare - Mix of informal and formal provision for wraparound care and transport - Proximity of informal care and formal care to each other and to the school - Car to transport child and travel to work	- Work reduced hours 8am - 4.30pm or have a home carer to provide wraparound care
Case Study 2: Lone mother works full-time rolling shift pattern	- Starts work early re shifts - Changing shift patterns - Long working days	- Use of two forms of childcare - Mix of informal provision for wraparound care and transport - Flexible informal childcare to fit with changing work hours - Proximity of both informal carers' homes to each other and to school - Car to transport child and to travel to work	- Work reduced hours, two days per week
Case Study 3: Lone mother works part-time unpredictable hours	- Unpredictable working hours - Unpredictable place of employment	- Use of two forms of childcare - Mix of informal provision for wraparound and general childcare and transport - Flexible informal childcare to fit with unpredictable work hours - Proximity of one carer[2] to child's home and nursery - Use of car for other carer[3] to transport child to nursery - Car to transport child and to travel to work	- Work predictable regular hours, three days per week
Case Study 4: Lone mother works part-time 9am-2pm	- 45 minute drive to work - Different schools for two children - Long distance from home to schools	- Use of two forms of childcare - Mix of informal provision for wraparound care and transport - Proximity of both informal carers' homes to the children's different schools - Car to transport children and to travel to work	- Move house to be closer to schools - Move house to reduce journey time to work and enable use of public transport to work

* OSC = Out-of-school club [2]The child's father [3]The child's grandmother

Table 4.4 shows that, whilst the nature of coordination problems varied across the case studies, all four lone parents used two forms of childcare: either a mix of formal and informal provision, or two informal carers. Parents also utilised carers who were located in close proximity to one another and to the relevant schools. Moreover, all the lone parents relied on a car to transport children and/or to travel to work, which helped reduce travel time between the home, childcare and work. Similarly, in spite of their complexity, all four parents thought their arrangements worked well overall but nevertheless expressed some desire for improvement: three parents wanted to change their working hours and one was planning to move house. The reasons for wanting to change working hours were multifaceted and included concerns about parents' and/or children's tiredness, and about time pressure in the evenings from chores and other activities, which reduced the amount of time available to spend with children. The reasons for moving house were also multifaceted and included wanting to reduce the distances between home and both work and schools, as well as wanting to eliminate the need to drive to work, as car park spaces in the workplace were being withdrawn.

Overall, these findings suggest that, whilst lone parents with complex coordination arrangements were coping, a reduction in distances and journey times between home, childcare, education and work would have helped them simplify their coordination arrangements. Their ultimate aim seemed to be to minimise the time costs associated with travel to workplaces and care settings, so that they could spend more time with children and/or reduce levels of tiredness. The question this raises is whether the other working lone parents had already simplified arrangements to manage coordination efficiently; also of interest is whether predictable events such as school holidays or unforeseen occurrences (a child's sickness, for example) presented new coordination problems. These issues will be considered in Section 4.2.

4.2   Strategies for simplifying the coordination of work, childcare and education

The four case studies of complex coordination arrangements discussed in Section 4.1 indicated that lone parents had adopted (or wanted to adopt) a number of strategies to help them coordinate work and care efficiently. These can be summed up as:

• Utilising childcare that is in close proximity to the family home or children's schools.

• Reducing travel times to work and childcare/school.

• Reducing the unpredictability or variability – or altering the timing – of working hours.

• Reducing the amount of time spent at work.

These strategies are not mutually exclusive and were commonly used in combination to achieve simplified coordination arrangements and reduce time costs. We have already seen that these and other similar strategies were adopted by both the full-time and part-time workers in our four case studies; we now widen our analysis to include all the working lone parents we spoke to for our study.

4.2.1   Proximity of the home to work, childcare and education

A high degree of proximity between work and care settings helped some lone parents in seeking to coordinate work, childcare and education by reducing travel times. The greatest proximity between locations was, of course, experienced by those who worked from home, which included some parents who were childminders and others who ran different sorts of businesses from home. These homeworkers said they specifically chose this work '*to fit in*' with their children's needs and/or that it was '*ideal*', with one stating '*nothing could be done to make things work any better'*. Such apparently 'ideal' arrangements appeared to result from parental decisions to 'choose' employment that fitted in with children's needs (though the perceived degree of choice they had about this varied between parents). The choice to work from home had sometimes been informed by previous experiences in which coordination of work and care had proved too difficult to manage. For example, one homeworking lone mother described how she had given up her teacher-training course because of difficulties making childcare arrangements to cover lectures that finished at 6pm (the university nursery closed at 5.15pm). She explained that, in order to attend these late lectures, she had been required to take her pre-school aged daughter to a friend's house half an hour from her home, before catching a bus to the university, eventually collecting her at 8pm or even later. In the end, this lone mother had decided that, as her daughter was getting very tired, these arrangements were not fair on her and, ultimately, she had '*to come first'*. Thus, this example highlights how studying can create similar coordination problems to working.

Having given up her teacher training course, the lone mother later chose to became a childminder because, she said, it '*fits in with having a child'* and also with being a lone parent, especially when there are no family members available to help. In her case, finding a way to work from home seemed to be a particularly good strategy for making coordination of work and childcare easier. In addition, taking up work as a home-based childminder relieved her of having to find formal childcare, in a situation where informal care was not available. However, it is important to remember, as discussed in Chapter 3, that homeworking can have disadvantages for some parents too, and might not yield all the benefits associated with going out to work, such as having social contact with other adults (a feature which can be particularly important for lone parents). Moreover, working as a childminder will not, of course, suit all parents, for all sorts of reasons, including skills, personality, work preferences and career aspirations.

Other ways in which parents had brought work and care settings into close proximity included moving house to live nearer to the workplace or finding work within the local neighbourhood, close to the family home. For the parent described

in Case Study Four, the choice to move house was related to the desire to create proximity between the home, the workplace and two schools. Other parents we spoke to had deliberately chosen not to look for work outside their neighbourhoods, as they said they did not want to travel on public transport which was a '*hassle*' and too slow, and/or that they did not want their travel time to exceed a certain threshold (commonly, parents considered journey times of an hour or more unacceptable). As we saw in Chapter 3, some parents also had reasons for wanting to work in the local area that did not relate directly to coordination: one parent, for example, had cobbled together three part-time jobs in the local community, as a cleaner and a care assistant, because she said this allowed her to '*be there'* for her children in case they became ill and because it gave her '*peace of mind'*. As discussed in Chapter 3, such considerations were sometimes particularly important for parents who were particularly nervous or worried about (re-)entering paid work.

As was clear from the case studies, limiting one's search for work to the local area sometimes related less to distance than to travel **time**. Parents described how some journeys of relatively short distances would take just 10 minutes in a car but would be difficult to achieve in less than hour by bus, and explained that this would make it very difficult to get children to care and themselves to work on time. Thus, while having access to a car did not create closer proximity *per se*, it had a similar effect by virtue of reducing parents' travel time. Accordingly, concerns about travel time seemed particularly important for lone parents who did not have a car or could not drive, and for those who did not have access to efficient public transport services. None of the working lone parents in our study reported travel times to work of longer than hour and journeys commonly took less than 30 minutes, indicating that the limit for lone parents in terms of feasible travel time for coordinating work, education and childcare lay somewhere around this threshold.

4.2.2   Control over working hours

The level of control lone parents had over their working hours varied along a continuum with 'full control' at one end and 'no control' at the other. Those who were nearer the full control end of the spectrum included the homeworkers, who were all self-employed. Being one's '*own boss'* and having the ability to dictate your own working time (including limiting the hours of childminding) implied a relatively high degree of control for these workers. One lone mother, for example, who worked as a therapist managed her own client load and made her consultation appointments to fit in with school hours. This parent did not see this as a deliberate strategy to coordinate work and care however, but rather the result of fortunate happenstance. She said she had always *'felt lucky'* that she could manage her work around the children, often without the need for additional childcare. She also described her job as a therapist (which she took on after becoming a lone parent) as '*fantastic*':

> *'Currently, the job I have now is fantastic but they're all at school now you see so it does make a difference, I take them to school in the morning and I'm back to pick them up and I do three, six hour days and it's wonderful, absolutely wonderful. '*

(lone mother of 17-year-old, 15-year-old, 11-year-old and ten-year-old, worker)

Lone parents who had some degree of control over their working hours, but not full control, tended to be those who were able to vary the start and end times of their working day, or the days and times in the week when they worked. This was achieved where an employer provided official flexi-time hours, or was willing to reach an informal agreement to change working hours when needed. This flexibility was often used to coordinate work with school hours or with out-of-school clubs that operated fixed opening times. Sometimes the degree of flexibility required was relatively small: some parents, for example, said that starting work just 10 minutes later in the morning had allowed them to take the children to school or to an out-of-school club themselves, without the need for help from others in transporting them and/or providing wraparound care. In contrast, as we saw in our four case studies, those parents whose working hours (including the time taken to travel to work) did not fit with the hours of formal childcare available to them commonly experienced complex coordination problems, which sometimes required them to arrange both informal wraparound care and help with children's transport to school/out-of-school clubs, in order to ensure continuity of care.

Some lone parents described how inflexible working hours had actually limited their options regarding the paid work they could do. In order to understand the way in which inflexible working hours can impact on a parent's job options, it is worth considering in more detail the experience of a lone mother who was training to be a student nurse. This mother used a childminder to provide wraparound care and transport to school, but the childminder did not start work until 8am and some of the shifts the mother had to work started at 7.30am. To cope with this, she had organised back-up care for five days of the week in the form of her brother's girlfriend who lived across the road. However, if she was required to work an early shift on the other two days, when the sister-in-law was not available, she was forced to swap this shift with her work colleagues, or – as a last resort – to inform her manager that she could not come to work that day, as she had a gap in childcare of 30 minutes or so. Moreover, this strategy of negotiating an exemption from working early shifts was manageable only because, as a student nurse, this lone mother was not included in the staff rota; therefore the employer had a sufficient number staff on duty already if she did not come to work.

This lone mother's problems did not just relate to early shifts, however: she was often expected to work late, past her official finishing time, at short notice and this caused problems because she could not rearrange hours of care with her childminder at the last minute. Again, she was forced to rely on back-up care from family or friends. Here we see how the lack of control over a shift pattern and irregular overtime, both of which implied an extension of working hours for short periods at

the beginning and end of the day, posed major coordination and childcare problems for a lone mother. In addition, whilst she felt she was coping with her current situation, she believed her job options could be limited in future because, as a qualified staff nurse, she would be included on the staff rota and would not be able excuse herself from working certain shifts.

So far, our discussion has highlighted how having either full control or some control to vary working hours could make the coordination of work, childcare and education easier for some lone parents. However, it is also important to note that coordination has to be managed continually over time. Lone parents described how they had been required to respond to changing circumstances – including changing location, changes at work and children's changing life-stages - in a variety of ways. For example, some parents had adopted strategies to allow them to exercise some control over the time of day worked, such as changing jobs in order to work hours which were perceived as more suitable, or negotiating a reduction in hours within an existing job, in order to make it *'easier'* to take the children to and from childcare or school. As we saw in Chapter 3, some lone parents suggested that an *'ideal'* or *'perfect'* job would be one that allowed them to work school hours and often in term-time only, as this would enable them to take children to and from school themselves and/or spend more time with them.

Overall, in relation to ongoing coordination of work and care, lone parents expressed a desire for work that would *'fit in'* with their children's needs. As discussed in Chapter 3, the desire for flexible working hours appeared to be mainly related to the fixed hours of school and/or formal childcare provision. Certainly, managing working hours (including travelling time) that extended beyond the times of formal childcare or school tended to be difficult and to create additional childcare and coordination problems for lone parents. In such circumstances, parents tended to rely on flexible informal childcare that included support with transporting children, because formal childcare was often not extensive or responsive enough to their needs. As one of the focus group respondent pointed out, the coordination of fixed work hours (including travelling time) with fixed childcare hours could be impossible to overcome:

> *'I have to start at eight o'clock, the nursery doesn't open until eight o'clock how can I get from the nursery to the job before eight o'clock and have my son sorted out, do your job finish at half past five, I'd never get from [place of work] in the traffic back to the nursery for six o'clock, no guarantee, how am I going to do that?'*

(lone parent, focus group participant, worker)

While another commented that:

> *'You can't ring up childminders and playgroups and say you'll be a bit late like you can with friends and family, that can make you panic.'*

(lone parent, focus group participant, worker)

Importantly, the evidence also suggests that studying can create similar coordination problems to being in work, especially if lectures or work placements fall outside formal childcare times.

Though it may sound obvious, it is important to remember that lone parents are generally parenting alone. They do not have a partner in the household to whom they can turn for support with wraparound care or help with children's transport to and from childcare/school. Other research, into the coordination arrangements of working mothers in couples, shows that fathers play an important role in this respect, and one that facilitates maternal employment (Skinner, 2003). In contrast, non-resident fathers were rarely mentioned in our study, and, where they were, their role rarely involved providing a substantial amount of childcare or help with transporting children. Therefore, it seemed that having flexibility over working hours was a particularly important factor in enabling lone parents to successfully coordinate work and care, particularly in the context of fixed hours of school and formal childcare provision, and in the absence of another parent.

4.2.3　School holidays and 'back-up' childcare

So far, we have described two main strategies by which lone parents sought to coordinate work, childcare and education during a typical working week: namely, by creating proximity between home, work and care and/or by exercising some control over working hours. Different arrangements might be necessary, however, during school holidays and at other times, such as when a child becomes sick.

School holidays

Childcare arrangements during the school holidays varied widely among the lone parents we spoke to. Parents who worked term-time only, or worked from home, and those who could take their children with them to work (a rare occurrence), did not use childcare in the school holidays as they had no need for it. Others carried on using the same providers as in term-time, either because they had pre-school age children and were using all-year-round forms of care, or because they were able to increase the hours of provision they used on an out-of-school basis during the term at these times. Childcare provision which was available in the school holidays as well as during term-time included childminders, grandparents and in one case a self-employed non-resident father. In some cases where informal care was used, the child actually re-located for the holiday period, although this was perceived as entailing some disadvantages for the child, giving them a sense of being sent from '*place to place*' or, as one mother said, making them feel '*feel a bit lost*' by not having the security either of being at home or of knowing in advance where they would be going. Another parent explained that when the children had been to stay with the grandparents they were bored and lost contact with their school friends, which made it difficult returning to school after the summer vacation.

Overall, full-time formal holiday care was perceived to be both sparse and costly, as well as difficult to arrange. Typically, a place in a holiday club had to be booked separately from a place in an out-of-school club, even where the two were run by the

same people and/or on the same premises, and it was common for parents to report difficulties in finding a place for their child in a holiday club. In response to these difficulties, some lone parents had dealt with the challenge of combining work and childcare during school holidays by taking annual leave from work and, typically, supplementing this with a mix of support from family members and friends. However, these parents tended not to have agreed regular arrangements with the family and friends they used for this 'supplementary' childcare, and were sometimes consequently worried about finding anyone to care for their children on certain days. It was clear, therefore, that school holidays could be a very worrying time for lone parents, though it was also notable that no working parents we spoke to said that such problems would lead them to give up work altogether.

Overall, a range of strategies were used for tackling the problem of holiday care, including working term-time only, which dispensed with the need for childcare at these times altogether. Some lone parents lamented the fact that their employers did not offer term-time work as an option, while in one case where an employer had introduced it, the parent said they did '*not allow it*' in her section as there were too many parents with school-age children. None of the parents we spoke to mentioned the possibility of taking unpaid leave during school holidays, presumably because they could not afford to lose their earned income, especially during the longer summer vacation.

Unforeseen events such as child's sickness

Whilst some parents praised their employers for a flexible attitude to unforeseen events such as a child's sickness, most of the lone parents we spoke to said that any emergency leave they took would have to be unpaid. Employers were also sometimes inflexible about taking leave in emergencies, or perceived by parents as disapproving of staff who took emergency leave. Consequently, some parents felt uncomfortable about requesting leave in such circumstances, sometimes even to the point where they felt they had to lie to their employers to get time off by saying that they were sick rather than the child. Parents whose emergency leave was unpaid or who felt uncomfortable about taking it tended to seek other childcare support as a 'back-up' for emergencies and other unforeseen events. This back-up care was generally an alternative to the regular childcare used and tended to be provided by family members and friends. Some parents were using a more extended social and family network for back-up care than they used for regular informal childcare, including aunts, uncles, nieces and so on. Grandparents sometimes acted as 'back-ups', but this was actually relatively uncommon, in some cases because parents felt it would be more effort for them to look after a sick than a healthy child, or because they were worried about the grandparents catching illnesses from the child. Most parents had some form of 'back-up' childcare arranged, and there was no evidence to suggest that any parents would be forced to give up work without it. In this respect, regular arrangements were far more key.

4.3 Negotiated agreements in the management of work and childcare

It was highlighted in Section 4.2 that lone parents used two main strategies to coordinate work and childcare: creating proximity between care settings and the workplace and/or seeking to exercise some control over working hours. We have also seen that, in some cases, parents had made agreements with employers to alter their working hours to fit in with their (changing) childcare needs. Similarly, parents had negotiated with formal providers, family and friends over the provision of childcare support or help with children's transport. Reaching agreements with these key people therefore underlies the process of coordinating work and childcare; in this section, we explore these agreements and negotiations in depth.

4.3.1 Agreements with employers

Among the lone parents we spoke to, some had reached agreements with their employers in order to assist their efforts to coordinate work and childcare/education. Such agreements could be made in a variety of ways. For example, aside from formal, permanent changes to parents' working hours and patterns, some agreements were made on a more ongoing basis. Some parents described, for example, a situation where there was an ongoing understanding between the employer and employee, enabling both parties to initiate and negotiate a change to the days or shifts worked, in order to suit each others' needs on an ad hoc but fairly frequent basis. This gave considerable flexibility to both sides over working hours, although it tended to operate in employment situations such as care homes, where other staff members were available to stand in for the employee when such alterations were made.

In other cases, agreements between parents and their employers were less formal, and were sometimes construed more as 'favours' or courtesies that had to be paid back to the employer in some way by the employee. This was particularly evident where minor adjustments to hours were made to give lone parents small amounts of time off to take children to and from school. For example, one parent explained how her employer had agreed that she could arrive ten minutes late in the morning so she could take her child to school and thereby avoid the need for an out-of-school club, on the condition that she 'made the time up'. The way the agreement was presented appeared to make the parent feel that the employer had done her a favour, particularly as she was told not to tell colleagues about her special arrangements:

> '…so I just mentioned it briefly just one day to my boss and, and she came back to me the same day and said "Look I've had a word with the head of the department and they've said if you want to come in at ten past nine, it's fine, can you sort of make it up because if anybody else finds out, they'll kick up a fuss." But I do, I do make it up.'

(lone parent of seven-year-old, worker)

This lone mother made the time up during evenings and weekends, when, she said, the amount of overtime she worked far outweighed the ten minutes taken off each day. Thus, the mother was effectively paying an additional penalty (in the form of unpaid overtime) for the 'favour' she had been granted.

In the case described, the employer had stated an explicit expectation of reciprocity, whereby the lone parent was expected to pay back the time taken off work in the mornings. In another case, however, the expectation of reciprocity was more implicit. This lone parent explained how her employer allowed people to leave work early 'occasionally' so they could pick up children from school, but then said that the same employer subsequently 'put pressure on' people to work late into the evenings during busy periods:

> *'They put pressure on you, they put the guilt stuff on you and if you don't [work late] they'll pull faces at you, work puts it all on you as well…'*

> (lone parent of sixteen year old, eleven year-old and six-year-old, worker)

The implicit nature of the expectation of reciprocity operating in this employer-employee relationship is evident in the remark about the employer '*pulling faces*' to apply pressure to the parent to do what the employer wanted, i.e. for the parent to work late. Another example of an implicit expectation of reciprocity was where a parent said she was allowed time off when her son was in hospital and that this was done as a '*favour*'. And, though she was not explicitly required to repay the favour, it resulted in her feeling obligated to repay the time off by working extra hours unpaid, which she said she duly did, in spite of her feelings of anger and resentment at the perceived expectation that she should do so.

Whether the expression of an employer's expectation that time off to tend to a sick child ought to be paid back was explicit or implicit, parents rarely seemed to feel they had a right to paid parental leave (either regularly or in emergencies) or a right to be supported by their employers for matters that were viewed as being 'outside' the sphere of work. Therefore, even those parents who complained about a lack of family-friendly arrangements – e.g. reduced hours or term-time only contracts – in their workplaces, or described how such arrangements were restricted or not handed out fairly, still felt that such measures constituted 'favours' rather than something they were entitled to as a right.

4.3.2   Agreements with childcare providers

Formal childcare providers

As we saw in Chapter 3, some lone parents had undertaken negotiations with formal childcare providers over certain matters, for example over delaying payment while they waited for a WTC claim to come through. However, the evidence from the study was that such negotiations were strictly limited, and that parents were very rarely able to negotiate over key matters such as hours and times with formal childcare providers. Certainly, both nurseries and out-of-school clubs were perceived as being very inflexible with regard to children's attendance, with some parents

complaining, for example, that they had not been able to negotiate part-time or half-day provision. Childminders were generally seen as slightly more flexible but, even here, a regular commitment for particular hours of care was the norm. For all these reasons, the most common and complex agreements between lone parents and childcare providers were negotiated with informal carers.

Grandparents

While parents' expectations of balanced reciprocal relations with their employers bore some resemblance to the kinds of relationships they tended to have with friends who provided childcare, they contrasted starkly with parents' expectations of some other informal childcare providers, particularly grandparents. It was rare for lone parents to talk in detail about the ways in which they negotiated childcare agreements with informal carers such as grandparents; rather, there was a sense in which they had 'just happened'. Such agreements seemed typically to operate on an implicit level, and many lone parents had difficulty explaining them. Even so, it appeared that a number of different expectations were operating on both sides with regard to childcare support provided by grandparents.

Attitudes among lone parents towards receiving childcare support from grandparents showed some subtle differences. Some lone parents expected that grandparental support **should** be forthcoming, whilst others were more hesitant and hopeful that grandparents would offer it. Sometimes parents had high expectations regardless of the fact that grandparents were also facing barriers in providing care for the child. One parent we spoke to, for example, seemed to expect the grandparent to continue to provide free childcare, even though she was caring for a sick relative and working herself. In a similar case, the problems had been compounded by explicit differences between the expectations of the lone parent and the grandparents. Here, the lone mother expressed the view that her parents **should** look after her children, but described how she had been having lots of rows with them because they were now finding it *'too much'* to look after her three children (they had provided childcare for nine years). They had asked her to give up work and look after the children herself; she refused to do this and did not seriously look for alternative formal childcare as she felt it was too expensive. Consequently, family relations had become strained. Clearly, this lone parent expected the grandparents to provide childcare irrespective of their own needs, although her ability to relieve them of this task was also restricted by the cost of formal childcare.

Both these examples illustrate a high degree of expectation among some lone parents that support should be provided by grandparents. Accordingly, among the lone parents we spoke to, it was common for grandparents to provide a substantial amount of childcare, in some cases to the extent that even very willing grandparents had begun to complain that it was becoming too much work. In contrast, however, other lone parents described how they did not want to be a burden to grandparents (expressed as not wanting *'to put on'* grandparents) by asking them to provide significant amounts of childcare. These parents tended to limit the amount of care provided by only leaving the children with grandparents occasionally, or for short

periods of time. This was generally because the lone parents said grandparents were unwell or found it too demanding or *'too hard'* to care for the children; they also expressed a desire to protect the grandparents and help maintain their health and well-being. Some parents who had strong concerns about '*being a burden*' said they would not use any grandparental care at all; again, this was typically linked to the perception that grandparents did not have the capacity to provide it, either because they were unwell or disabled, because they were already caring for someone else (e.g. other grandchildren or sick spouses), or because they were in employment themselves. In some cases, grandparents themselves placed limits on the amount of childcare they were prepared to offer for the same kinds of reason.

Some lone parents had not asked for support from grandparents, but had instead waited for it to be offered, or had received an offer at an early stage, before the need to ask had arisen. This was described as *'not asking'* grandparents for support, or as a situation in which the grandparents '*just offered*', '*just rallied round*' or offered support out of the *'kindness of their heart'*. In these circumstances, lone parents seemed to have been hopeful that support would be offered, rather than expecting that support should be given. It was also left up to the grandparents to decide to help or not and, when they did, lone parents typically appeared to accept that they were willing and able to do so.

Thus, the amount of support lone parents expected from grandparents varied widely, from parents who expected a great deal of support (e.g. the continual provision of substantial amounts of childcare, sometimes irrespective of grandparents' needs) to parents who expected none at all (often linked with perceived reasons why grandparents would not be able to provide it, including grandparents' own work commitments). In some cases, however, expectations were more balanced and reciprocal in nature. For example, one lone parent said she expected no support from the grandmother but qualified this by saying that, if the grandmother were to offer to provide childcare, she would pay her to do so. In this case, the expectation that childcare would not be offered appeared to be connected to the fact that the grandmother was relatively young and had a dependent child of her own: at the time of the interview, she and the lone parent were looking after one another's children on an ad hoc basis, for purposes other than paid work, which may help explain why this parent's expectations were lower than those of others. It may also have been related to a perception, echoed by some other parents, that grandparents should only provide childcare if and when they are genuinely willing to do so:

> *'I think sometimes they [grandparents] feel obligated as well and that puts a strain on the relationship, like if you're asking them to look after your child and then they don't really want to, there's somewhere else they really want to be but they don't really want to say no to you at the same time'*

(lone parent, focus group participant, worker)

It was uncommon for grandparents to be paid in any way for providing childcare Only one parent said she actually paid a grandmother for her time in cash, although there were other cases in which parents had offered money to grandparents and these offers had been declined. Other parents, however, made some effort to pay

grandparents back 'in kind', for example some said they 'took their mother shopping' occasionally or bought her flowers as a thank you. We will go on to consider the issue of paying informal childcare providers in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Other relatives and friends

Lone parents who used other relatives, besides grandparents, or friends for childcare were more likely to have offered payment of some kind or to have expressed a wish to offer payment, in order to make these arrangements and relationships more '*business like*'. However, it was also clear that the issue of payment was more likely to arise in relation to childcare provided regularly over long periods of time, and not to one-off or ad hoc arrangements. In general, parents offered gifts, childcare or other forms of support (rather than money) '*in return*' to friends or extended family members. The phrase '*in return*' suggested that these relationships operated on the basis that support from these sources should be reciprocated in fairly equal measure. As one parent described her relations with her sister-in-law:

> *'Yeah, and I felt like cos it was my sister-in-law doing it and my sister couldn't obviously she had like, she was doing a hairdressing course, I mean she was full-time, she was busy, and so I felt, yeah, I did, I felt like, you know, in return I had to put a lot of effort in making sure that my brothers were OK, do you know what I mean, like keeping everybody happy.'*

(lone parent, focus group participant, worker)

So, in relationships with friends or extended family members, unlike those with grandparents, reciprocity was a feature and, in that regard, these relationships were more similar to agreements made with employers.

4.4   Conclusion

The coordination of work, care, education and travel is often taken for-granted as an invisible aspect of a working parent's life. Talk about who is 'picking up' or 'dropping off' children tends to occur in a casual parlance that can consign such practical arrangements to the mundane and everyday. However, this study shows that, for lone parents, the coordination and management of work, education, childcare and travel is anything but a mundane or straightforward aspect of family life.

4.4.1   Practical arrangements for coordination

In this chapter, we have considered how lone parents managed the effective coordination of work-time with attendance at school and childcare provision to ensure continuity of children's care. It is important that we learn more about how coordination is achieved, as it is a key component in the successful reconciliation of paid work and care. For example, working parents must make arrangements for children to be transported between the home, childcare and/or school in such a way

that travel times and parental work times coincide with the different times at which schools and childcare providers are available. To put it more simply, care **and** transportation of children across different settings have to be seamlessly dovetailed together to ensure that children are accompanied and supervised at all appropriate times – which may, of course, in the case of young children, mean at **all** times of the day. Moreover, such arrangements also have to be coordinated with parents' own working hours and travel times.

In Section 4.1, we presented four case studies as examples of the most complex coordination arrangements found among the working lone parents we spoke to. These were explored in depth to illustrate the extent and nature of these parents' coordination problems and to highlight how these were being managed. Parents' arrangements were illustrated clearly in figures 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3, which showed the types and extent of support used by these parents to meet children's care and transport needs, and how these were coordinated together in a typical working day. Though the number and patterns of working hours across the four case studies varied considerably – from full-time to part-time work, and from regular days to rolling shift patterns – we saw how the lone parents adopted similar arrangements for managing childcare and coordination. These included: using two forms of wraparound care alongside education on a daily basis; relying on informal carers to transport children to formal childcare settings or to and from school; and using a car to travel to work and to transport children.

The common element underpinning the need for such multiple and complex arrangements was the fact that these four parents' working hours (including travel times) extended beyond one or both ends of the school day and/or the opening times of out-of-school club provision. In such circumstances, parents tended to need help in getting children to and from school or childcare at the beginning and/or the end of the working day. This was a common reason why working lone parents (except homeworkers) needed greater support in coordinating work, education and childcare more generally. Travel to work time was also an important issue, as this could effectively extend working hours even if they did not, strictly speaking, extend beyond the normal school/childcare day. Lone parents' journey times to work tended to lie around the 30-minute mark, with very few reporting travel time of an hour or more, suggesting that this could be the threshold for feasible coordination of work, childcare and school.

4.4.2   Strategies for tackling coordination problems

From this in-depth examination of childcare and transport arrangements three underlying strategies were identified in the management of coordination. These involved:

• creating proximity between the home, workplace, education and childcare settings;

• reaching negotiated agreements with employers over the timing and number of working hours; and

- reaching negotiated agreements with family and friends for informal childcare and coordination support.

These strategies were not mutually exclusive and were commonly used in combination. In the first, proximity was created by parents utilising childcare that was close to the home and/or to the education setting, or by moving house to be nearer the workplace or education. In the second, parents sought alterations in their working hours which would allow them to deal with the children's transport needs themselves and/or to dispense with the need for childcare. In the third strategy, parents sought support with childcare and with children's transport when needed.

The latter two strategies of negotiating work and care are very closely linked: parents need to make alterations in working hours to fit with childcare provision or make alterations in childcare provision to fit with working hours. Where there is inflexibility in either of these – childcare or work hours – this makes the task of coordination much more difficult and may result in some lone parents having to change jobs or even give up work altogether. We saw that this had happened in a few cases where coordination had become too difficult to manage. The evidence suggests that the main aim of these strategies is to reduce the 'time costs' associated with children's and parents' travel and with work commitments.

4.4.3 Negotiations with employers and carers

Lone parents expressed the desire for working hours that fitted with their children's childcare needs. Some had successfully achieved this to their satisfaction by reaching negotiated agreements with their employers to alter their working hours. Negotiating such agreements with employers was an important strategy to deal with coordination problems, as employers could provide the flexibility lone parents required. This was particularly important in the face of the fixed hours of school and out-of-school club provision, as flexible work could free parents up to transport children by themselves without the need for help from others. However, negotiating such agreements with employers for alterations in working hours could take place in various different ways, some of which were more satisfactory than others. Employers tended to operate agreements for changes in working hours on a basis of reciprocity, whereby the parents were expected to pay back short periods of time off, and this sometimes appeared to work to the detriment of parents, with some reporting that what they 'paid back' in unpaid overtime far outweighed the time taken off work. Such outcomes could induce feelings of guilt, gratitude or resentment on the part of parents. Typically, however, lone parents felt they had no right to time off work for childcare reasons and construed any such agreements as being granted 'favours' by employers, even if the price they paid was also deemed unreasonably high.

The reciprocity involved in negotiations between lone parents and their employers contrasted sharply with agreements over grandparental childcare provision. Negotiations with grandparents tended to be much more complicated and implicit in nature, with expectations varying on all sides. At one extreme, some lone parents expected grandparents to provide childcare as of right, while, at the other, no

support was expected at all, with some parents wanting to protect grandparents from the burden of providing childcare, perhaps because the grandparents worked, were ill or frail, or because the lone parent felt it was *'not right'* they should help. Reaching agreements for childcare support with grandparents was therefore embedded in a milieu of different social relationships that were affected by the age, wellbeing and other factors that affected the capacity and willingness of grandparents to provide childcare. This became particularly evident when compared to agreements made with friends or other extended family members for childcare, as these tended to operate on a basis of reciprocity more closely resembling negotiations with employers.

While some lone parents had negotiated agreements with formal childcare providers over specific matters, such as delaying payment whilst waiting for a WTC claim to come through, the overriding impression to emerge from the study was that there was very little room for negotiation over key matters such as hours and times of use with formal childcare providers.

4.4.4   Conclusion

Managing work and childcare/education involves more than simply choosing good quality childcare but also choosing suitable childcare that can be coordinated with work commitments. In reality, childcare and work choices, even if made independently from one another in the first instance, have to be tied together at some point for the reconciliation of work and family life. To do this successfully, lone parents have to coordinate their families' arrangements on a routine daily basis, on an emergency basis, covering ad-hoc or unforeseen events, and on a yearly basis that covers school holidays. Coordination also involves negotiating agreements with childcare providers (primarily informal ones rather than formal ones) and employers. In many respects, whilst these negotiations are rooted in parents' social networks, managing them in relation to meeting coordination needs is a highly skilled activity where events and resources have to be brought together in a particular time frame to make key events happen and arrangements run smoothly.

Whilst all the working lone parents we spoke to had, by definition, achieved some kind of coordination, it was evident that the efficiency of these arrangements and parents' satisfaction with them were variable. Hence the desire to change working hours to fit around children's care, which in itself is an expression of an unmet need in relation to coordination. This desire also tended to reflect the potentially substantial time costs associated with paid work, which often left parents feeling tired and lacking in time to spend with the children. Arguably, the time costs of paid work were felt particularly acutely by lone parents because, unlike coupled parents, they usually bore the burden of housework and other domestic chores solely on their shoulders, alongside their responsibilities for ensuring (with or without help) children's transport and continuity of care.

Overall, the rich data in this qualitative study has been used to show the complex arrangements that are involved in coordinating work and care as well as some of the

management strategies used to achieve a successful, if not always efficient, resolution of coordination needs among working lone parent families. Relatively little research has previously explored the function of coordination in reconciling work and family life. Some research studies have referred to a 'childcare jigsaw' or a 'mosaic' of childcare where informal care is used to complement formal provision (Wheelock and Jones, 2002; Mauthner et al, 2001). Other researchers discuss the act of 'juggling', or 'patching together' of childcare and work needs (Backett-Milburn et al, 2001; Perrons, 1998). But there is very little work that has explored in-depth what is actually involved on a daily basis and how everything (work, care, education and transport) is coordinated together, especially in lone parent families. While Skinner (2003) explored how coordination was managed and how it could act as a disincentive to employment among mainly partnered mothers, the study included little data on lone mothers. This study builds on that work and contributes to the knowledge base about the successful reconciliation of work and care among lone parent families. It highlights how time and space dimensions are important elements that need to be figured in to ensure effective coordination. It also shows that lone parents lacking the support of a non-resident parent may find the time costs associated with doing paid work and coordinating arrangements more difficult to manage. In addition, it illustrates the key role that can be played by employers, who are in a position to facilitate coordination through offering flexibility over working hours. However, in reviewing the employer role, it is also important to understand the explicit and implicit frameworks within which employer/employee negotiations take place, and the roles that notions of reciprocity and unearned generosity play. These considerations raise important implications for policy in relation to work-life balance initiatives.

5   Lone parents' policy messages

Parents who took part in both interviews and focus groups for the study were asked about their views and experiences of government policy regarding lone parents, childcare and work. In this chapter, we will present their perceptions, opinions and suggestions, as well as drawing these together with a range of more implicit policy messages emerging from previous chapters. Then, in Chapter 6, we will go on to discuss how the policy messages might be interpreted and put into practice for parents with different orientations towards work and parental care.

5.1   Parents and work

Levels of awareness and experience of recent government initiatives aimed at enabling and encouraging parents to work varied considerably among lone parents.

5.1.1   Working Tax Credit[4]

The introduction of the Working Tax Credit (WTC) (formerly Working Families' Tax Credit) – particularly the childcare element – was probably the recent policy initiative of which lone parents were most aware. In general, the reaction it received was resoundingly positive. It had clearly made a great difference to parents in a variety of situations, both in terms of enabling them to work and by allowing them to use childcare to which they might not otherwise have had access. One respondent observed that the childcare element of the WTC was particularly helpful to parents who did not have access to informal childcare provision, and there was evidence that it had prompted some parents to consider formal childcare seriously for the first time. Parents who had been faced with the challenge of combining work and childcare prior to the introduction of the WTC observed that things had improved significantly as a result of the policy and, crucially, owing to its 16-hour threshold,

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[4]   The changes that occurred to the WTC in April 2004 coincided with the fieldwork period for this study. Therefore, while parents did not mention any impact these changes may have had, it is possible that they would have experienced some effects further down the line.

the WTC was seen as making the prospect of *part-time* work feasible for lone parents, which, for some, made the difference between working and not working:

> '*If they hadn't had Working Family Tax Credit now I would have just probably not worked. Or had to have worked full-time completely and not have seen my child, which I know I probably wouldn't have done.*'

(lone mother of four-year old, worker)

There were, nevertheless, some parents who felt that there was still room for improvement with respect to the WTC. A proportion simply thought the percentage of childcare costs paid by the government should be increased, preferably to 100%, with one parent expressing the opinion that nursery provision ought to be considered part of a child's compulsory free education. Views did vary here, however, with some parents stating very clearly that they did not consider it the government's responsibility to pay all their childcare costs. As discussed in Chapter Three, some parents on low incomes reported finding it difficult to fund 30% of the childcare they were using, and felt that a relatively well-paid job and relatively low-cost childcare were still required in order to make working as a lone parent feasible. Parents with low levels of skills and few qualifications (and therefore low earnings potential) were likely to make this point, and, while those parents who were most enthusiastic about the WTC tended to have fewer children, the likelihood of a parent expressing the view that the childcare element of the WTC was insufficient did not appear to be related to the number or age of their children. Other parents, however, felt that the problem was more to do with the distribution of the money. Some observed that even parents on comparatively high incomes were able to claim the WTC and questioned whether this was the best way of distributing the funds. There was also a specific suggestion that lone parents should be subsidised at a higher rate than partnered parents owing to their lower earnings potential and the greater childcare needs implied, for example, by the relative rarity of shift-parenting arrangements with ex-partners.

Aside from issues around the level of funding offered under the WTC, some parents felt that there were problems associated with its design and operation. We mentioned in Chapter Three that the WTC cannot be claimed until seven days before a parent is due to start work and that some claims had taken a long time to process when parents first (re-)entered work. There were also comments that receiving the WTC in arrears meant that up-front childcare costs effectively had to be paid out of a parent's pocket in the first instance, again contributing to the difficulty of making the transition into work, or making any changes whilst in work that implied an increase in the cost of childcare (e.g. increasing working hours). Some parents also highlighted the fact that childcare costs can fluctuate during the course of a year (e.g. increasing during school holidays), while WTC subsidies would not usually change to reflect this,[5] although they tended to conclude that the best

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[5] Note that the WTC can be adjusted to reflect a change in childcare costs of at least £10 if that change lasts four weeks or more. There was no evidence that the lone parents we spoke to were aware of this.

response to this would be a change in the pattern of school holidays rather than a change to the WTC itself.

Finally, in spite of widespread appreciation of the role of the WTC in enabling parents to work part-time, some highlighted the fact that the 16-hour threshold did not always match up with parents' preferences with regard to working hours. On the one hand, it was argued that, in seeking to facilitate part-time hours, the WTC might actually deter parents from increasing their hours, accepting promotions and progressing in their careers. This was because, when faced with such opportunities, a parent would effectively conduct a speculative 'better-off', calculation, taking into account increased hours and/or increased pay offset against increased childcare use and/or a proportional decrease in WTC. If this calculation came out with a negative result, the parent might conclude that it made most sense to stick with the status quo. At the other end of the scale, however, some parents expressed a desire to work for *fewer* than 16 hours a week, as part of a gradual entry or return to the labour market, perhaps aiming to mirror the building up of hours of childcare, which was sometimes preferred in order to allow the whole family to settle into a new routine slowly, diluting the impact of what can be a traumatic transitional phase. Owing to the 16-hour threshold, the WTC did not motivate these parents to seek work.

5.1.2   The New Deal for Lone Parents

The other major policy initiative of which there was high awareness was the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP); we discussed this in Chapter 3 as a key facilitator for moving into work. Overall, parents appreciated the opportunity to speak to an NDLP adviser (with some exceptions who had found the approach intrusive or viewed it as implying they 'ought' to work) and had found their contact useful, to a greater or lesser extent. The elements which seemed to have stood out in their minds were discussions about potential routes into work and the 'better-off' calculation; the provision of information about the WTC was also fairly common and some respondents mentioned other work-focused assistance such as CV writing and interview practice. Discussion of childcare was more rare and, where it did take place, it was uncommon for advisers to have provided significant practical help in finding suitable childcare. In spite of the variability of the service, however, it was clear that the NDLP had made a large contribution to some lone parents' decisions to (re-) enter work.

One strong message emerging from discussion of the NDLP was that relationships between parents and personal advisers were most productive where they were continuous, committed and thorough. This required a collaborative and 'holistic' approach, whereby discussions covered the financial aspects of both work and childcare, but also took into account other issues such as job satisfaction, career aspirations and day-to-day coordination of arrangements. It was important that the adviser was seen as being sympathetic and understanding towards the parent, rather than trying to impose a 'template' on them or being focused on getting them

into a job (sometimes any job) as quickly as possible. They also needed to be flexible and responsive to the different needs of different parents, which might involve accommodating special circumstances such as health problems or low levels of literacy, as well as emotional barriers such as low confidence and worries related to leaving children for the first time.

The overall impression emerging from the study was that the prospect of (re-) entering work can appear almost overwhelming to lone parents and, where a relationship with an NDLP adviser really works, where a parent feels genuinely and fully supported, it can make all the difference. The potential of these 'partnerships' to ease the transition into work seems great, particularly if they extend beyond the point of entry so that parents expect and experience support during the first phase of work. Extension to bring in employers as additional 'partners', encouraging them to understand and appreciate *all* the issues around a lone parent's entry into work, would also enhance the potential of the NDLP for supporting lone parents in the ways they need and want to be supported.

5.1.3   The overall policy approach

While there was evidence of a general appreciation of the Government's commitment to enabling parents to combine work with family responsibilities through such initiatives as the WTC and the NDLP, some parents had a more negative view of the policy approach that had been taken to this issue. The main focus of these views was a perceived failure on the part of the Government to recognise that some parents genuinely did not wish to work, especially in the early years of a child's life when it was strongly felt that it was parents' '*right*' to be at home with their children full-time if they so wished. Some parents said that the communications they had received from the Government had made them feel '*pushed*' to (re-)enter work before they were ready, sending the message that they were expected to or '*ought*' to work. In some cases, this message seemed to have been received as a result of personal contact, e.g. with an NDLP adviser, but more commonly it referred to a general impression gleaned through the media and word-of-mouth, or to 'first impressions' gained as a result of receiving, for example, postal communications as part of the NDLP. In some cases, it was a combination: one parent, for example, described how her NDLP adviser had gone some way – but perhaps not the whole way – to remedying the negative effect of the initial letter she had received:

> '*I think it was just the fact that they were telling me…the letter was almost saying: 'you're getting a job, you're sending your children to a childminder's, that is it.' It was quite a blunt letter really. But when I spoke to them they said: 'no no it's not like that at all…we won't be pushing you into getting a job but, you know, obviously you have to understand that eventually we do expect you to go back to work.''*

> (lone mother of three-year-old, non-worker)

The message here was that what really mattered to parents was a feeling that the Government recognised and respected the diversity of parents, with all their

different preferences and priorities, and that they were offering a choice of routes or lifestyles rather than implying that every parent would inevitably (re-)enter work.

Parents had some suggestions for ways in which what they saw as a relatively 'narrow' approach to the issue of supporting lone parents with young children might be diversified and improved. With regard to parents who *were* interested in (re-) entering work, the emphasis was on supporting a range of routes and activities. In particular, some parents emphasised the importance of developing a career or getting the '*right*' job, rather than just taking any job, and in many cases this implied a need to gain or renew skills and/or experience through study or training. Educational and training routes were not generally perceived as being so well supported by the Government as work itself, with some parents complaining of a short-term approach, focused on getting parents into work and off benefits as quickly as possible, rather than helping them to develop in ways that might prove more beneficial to themselves and their families over the long-term.

Other suggestions concerned ways in which the Government might illustrate a real commitment to parental choice about *whether* to work. Some of these focused on the financial: the quality of life which it was possible to achieve on benefits and the social stigma associated with '*living off the state*' were both seen as symbolic of the Government's focus on work and disregard or lack of '*respect'* for parents who chose to stay at home with their children. Some parents preferred a long-term solution to this problem while others, whose views or preferences regarding the choice not to work were limited to the early part of a child's life, argued for extended maternity leave or some other funding initiative that would enable parents to delay (re-) entering work until they were able to secure – and in some cases **test** – suitable childcare.

The perceived support required by non-working lone parents extended beyond the merely financial, however. It was typical for this group, particularly those who had been on their own and out-of-work for long periods of time, and/or those who lacked substantial social networks in their area, to describe feelings of isolation, loneliness, boredom and depression. Even some parents who had once intended to go out to work when their children were older found that they had got into a '*habit*' of staying at home and may have built up a resistance to work, either because they perceived that their period out of work would make it harder for them to find a suitable job or just because they had become nervous about something which had, over time, begun to appear unfamiliar and somewhat intimidating.

The non-working lone parents we spoke to felt that the negative aspects of their particular circumstances need to be tackled, whether or not they would ultimately (re-)enter paid work, and there are a number of ways in which the Government can work towards this. Indeed, initiatives such as Sure Start, Extended Schools and Children's Centres aim to do exactly this by funding and facilitating activities for parents and, on the whole, parents' own views and experiences appeared to be in line with policy thinking here. Non-working lone parents emphasised the benefits of being able to get together with other parents, both to share knowledge and

experiences (e.g. about childcare) and for social purposes. It was also notable that some lone parents who had experienced severe feelings of nervousness, under-confidence or isolation found that getting involved in activities focused on their children did not pose the same problems as approaching 'adult-centred' pursuits; their motivation to go out and meet others where they felt that it would benefit their children was also likely to be high. It was clear, therefore, that facilities such as mother and toddler groups or centres where parents can take children to play could perform an important function in tackling the negative feelings that some parents experienced as a result of staying at home. As we mentioned in Chapter 3, formal childcare providers can also fulfil this role, and in some cases had provided opportunities for lone parents to engage in voluntary work or even acted as 'gateways' into paid employment. The evidence from the study was that voluntary work can benefit lone parents with a range of different work orientations: therefore, an expansion in the opportunities for lone parents to undertake voluntary work (in schools and childcare settings, but also elsewhere) would very likely prove helpful in tackling the double challenge of improving employability and supporting parents who cannot or choose not to work.

5.2   Childcare

Many of the messages emerging from our discussions with lone parents concerned the Government's approach to childcare provision, both formal and informal.

5.2.1   Formal childcare

Parents identified room for improvement relating to almost all the aspects of childcare 'suitability' discussed in Chapter 3. Here we highlight some of the key messages about formal childcare emerging from the study.

Pre-school care

With regard to day care, the main problems were long waiting lists for day nurseries and a lack of places, as well as a widespread perception of a 'two-tiered' system, with good quality private provision the preserve of wealthier parents and poorer quality council-run nurseries the only option for less affluent families and those relying on the childcare element of the WTC. An increase in the number of good quality, affordable day nurseries was therefore a priority. Sure Start was generally regarded positively by those who had come into contact with it, although others complained that it was restricted to certain areas and not available to parents who lived in a poor part of a more affluent area. Aside from issues of quality and affordability, some parents also reported problems associated with the inflexibility of day care providers, insisting on minimum amounts or certain patterns of attendance: one mother, for example, described how her nursery had refused to allow her child to attend for half-days, even though she had offered to find a friend who could use the place for the other half-days to make up a full week.

There was a perception that the Government had made significant steps in terms of improving childcare services for three- and four-year-olds over recent years, and some parents mentioned specifically the two-and-a-half hours of free early years education that is now available to all children of those ages. This provision did not typically have a significant influence over parents' decisions about work, however, owing to the small number of hours per day, and, as mentioned in Chapter 3, other research has shown that some parents would prefer to be able to use their allocated 12.5 hours of free provision more flexibly (e.g. across fewer than five days per week) – a requirement that the Government has now acknowledged (Harries *et al.*, 2004). The same research has also highlighted various problems associated with combining early years education and other childcare, for example because a childminder still required paying for these hours or was not prepared to take and pick up their child from the early years setting concerned, or because it was perceived that schools were favouring those children who had attended sessions of early years education there when it came to allocating school places later on.

Out-of-school clubs

In contrast to early years education, affordable childcare for school-age children outside school hours was seen as an area for significant further investment. There was high demand for more care outside school hours, at least between 8am and 6pm, although it would need to extend beyond these hours for some parents working full-time. Given the mismatch between typical hours of school and paid work, the relative scarcity of out-of-school care was considered impractical and unacceptable, with one parent commenting that, in his view, breakfast and after-school clubs ought to be:

> *'a normal thing that happens in virtually all schools.'*

> (lone father of eight-year-old and five-year-old, student)

Some parents felt that out-of-school clubs worked best when located on the same site as the school, partly because this eliminated problems related to transporting children between sites and partly because they associated the school premises with high standards of safety and proper supervision. Others, however, were concerned that attending an out-of-school club could make for '*a very long day*', particularly if the club took place on the school site and could therefore be perceived by children as an '*extension of school*'; some therefore preferred the idea of their children going out to do activities, perhaps at another venue such as a local leisure centre. Parents typically emphasised the importance of out-of-school clubs being well-organised and providing children with enjoyable and stimulating activities, rather than just leaving them to entertain themselves. It was recognised, however, that it could sometimes be particularly difficult to arrange suitable and attractive activities for children who were really too old for 'childcare', but not yet old enough to spend parts of the day unsupervised.

Aside from a lack of places, some parents also complained of inflexibility in the way out-of-school clubs were run, often requiring up-front payment and/or a regular

commitment well in advance. In some cases, it was reported that out-of-school clubs were giving priority to children who would attend regularly or for a larger number of hours, rendering them unavailable to parents who only needed them on certain days, perhaps because they worked part-time or were able to use informal childcare on some days of the week. There was also evidence that, in some cases, out-of-school provision had been short-lived, either owing to a lack of consistent demand or problems finding adults willing to get involved. The fact that the parents we spoke to were typically prepared to pay only a small fee for out-of-school care (a few pounds per session at most) might also suggest that a lack of funds was partly to blame. The closing down of out-of-school clubs, and cases where clubs had been planned but failed to materialise, had caused problems for some lone parents, emphasising that this care is only useful if it is available, affordable and *reliable*. Some parents expressed a preference for using a childminder for out-of-school care – often owing to perceived greater flexibility – and while some had managed to secure such arrangements, it was generally understood that providing a small amount of care at either end of the day was not very profitable and therefore less attractive to childminders.

Finally, a couple of additional specific messages on out-of-school care:

• Whether or not they have a requirement for out-of-school provision, there is, as we saw in our discussion on coordination, some demand from parents for 'care' to cover journeys to and from school and/or childcare providers. This applies particularly to parents who have to cope with significant distances between workplaces, schools and/or childcare providers, and hence can struggle to fit transporting their children around their own working hours. In practice, as we saw in Chapter 4, friends and family tend to be relied on for this sort of provision; an observation that also applies to parents seeking childcare for a small number of hours for other reasons, e.g. one-off or more regular appointments or periods of respite.

• While increasing the availability of breakfast and after-school clubs may prove an adequate response to the needs of parents who work more-or-less 'standard' hours, parents who work what one respondent referred to as '*awkward hours*' are likely to have additional childcare needs. Among the lone parents we spoke to, parents who worked shifts and student parents who were required to attend evening teaching were especially likely to express a need for childcare at atypical times and, again, typically perceived informal childcare as their only option. While, in some cases (e.g. night work) informal care was also likely to be preferred, formal provision during early mornings and evenings, and possibly at weekends, would have appealed to some of those parents working non-standard hours.

School holidays

As we saw in Chapter 4, the school holidays, particularly the six-week summer holiday, could present particular problems for parents seeking to combine paid work and family responsibilities. The same difficulties as with out-of-school clubs were widely reported, including a lack of places, long waiting lists, high costs and

short hours. Availability problems emerged as particularly severe, with some parents describing a scramble to get your child's name down for a holiday club, sometimes several months in advance.

Aside from increasing the amount of affordable holiday provision, parents also suggested that staggering term-times and/or distributing school holidays more evenly across the year could help relieve the pressure at what was variously described as a '*nightmare*' time or a time for '*survival*'. Staggering term-times could free up places in holiday clubs, as well as reducing the competition among colleagues to take leave in the same weeks (which can be a substantial problem, especially in female-dominated organisations). A more even distribution of holiday across the year would ease the cost burden of paying for six weeks of (often expensive) holiday care in one go and might also make it more feasible for parents to ask friends and family to help; it was notable that even some parents who used a substantial amount of informal provision across the year felt that six continuous weeks of full-time care was '*too much to ask'*.

Quality of care

While the clearest messages to emerge about childcare related to cost and availability, parents' strong concerns with the quality of provision also had some implications from a policy perspective. It was generally felt that childcare providers ought to be inspected and regulated thoroughly, and parents were on the whole appreciative of such measures as police checks and OFSTED inspections, although some felt that these could be extended, for example to include random '*spot checks*', as well as organised visits for which providers could prepare. There were also some suggestions for ways of communicating the information resulting from regulatory activities to parents more effectively, such as making short, user-friendly summaries of OFSTED reports readily available, or adding symbols of accreditation to all information concerning or distributed by providers ('*a flash-your-badge type-thing*'). No parents we spoke to mentioned the Government's Investors in Children and Children Come First quality assurance schemes.

Concerns about quality were generally heightened when it came to childminders and some parents felt that this form of provision ought to be regulated particularly closely, perhaps involving a longer training course or more stringent criteria to be met in order to register, e.g. involving substantial background checks or psychological assessment. In general, parents gave the impression that they did not have as much confidence in inspections of childminders as in other OFSTED inspections (if, indeed, they were aware that OFSTED inspected childminders at all) and some felt that it would be relatively easy for a childminder to give an inspector an unrepresentative positive impression (perhaps implying that '*spot checks*' would be particularly important for childminders).

The concept of a 'Children's Centre'

Though the term 'Children's Centre' was not used, parents were explicitly asked, by means of one of the exercises used in focus groups, to reflect on the prospect of locating childcare provision on the same sites as other family services such as health services, job advice and training. The suggestion was met with some bemusement, indicating that there may be some way to go in developing parents' understanding of the concept and encouraging them to 'buy into' Children's Centres as a major component of future childcare provision. Some parents commented that multi-purpose sites would not make a great deal of difference to them as they only spent a small amount of time at the doctor's or dentist's anyway, and felt they would probably be most useful to parents seeking work. And, while one parent made a positive association with a crèche at her local library, which allowed her to look at the internet while her child played nearby, others were worried that mixing lots of people with different needs and problems together in one place might prove chaotic, and were inspired to draw more negative comparisons, for example with social services 'drop-in' centres:

> *'It's just single parents…if you've got problems…it'd be the times that you'd wear your hood up and run in.'*

> (lone mother of 13-year old and five-year old, worker)

Of course, the extent to which these misgivings about the concept of a Children's Centre will affect lone parents' behaviour as the policy gains momentum remains to be seen. However, it is important to acknowledge that, in spite of the negative tone of their explicit reaction to the idea, parents emphasised, in other contexts within the discussions conducted for the study, the importance of what are in fact some of the envisioned functions of Children's Centres (e.g. enabling lone parents to meet and exchange views in settings where facilities for children are also provided (see Section 5.1.3)).

5.2.2   Informal childcare

As we have described, the need or desire to use family and friends for childcare was a theme running through our discussions with lone parents, for a multiplicity of reasons including trust, cost and flexibility. The fact that informal carers were not eligible for subsidy via the childcare element of the WTC was interpreted by some as a sign that the Government undervalued what was considered to be among the most – and, by some parents, *the* most – valuable sources of care. In addition, the fact that the government was imposing restrictions on the types of childcare eligible for the subsidy was seen as a further sign that they wanted to take responsibility for making choices about work and childcare out of the hands of parents themselves. As one lone mother put it:

> *'They're not helping you the way you want to be helped.'*

> (lone mother of 16-year-old, five-year-old and one-year-old, worker)

Some parents said that the opportunity to pay friends and family for providing childcare would make them feel more comfortable and confident about asking for it, which might, for some, have a significant influence over their decisions about whether or not to work, and about the number of hours it might be feasible for them to undertake. As it was, asking for substantial amounts of care sometimes felt awkward, made parents feel guilty or had a negative effect on their feelings of self-esteem and independence; moreover, all of these feelings were likely to be exacerbated if the informal carer was actually having to *spend* money in order to provide the childcare, for example on food or petrol. In addition, in cases where friends or family were providing care in order to enable the carer to work, parents sometimes saw this as effectively ruling out the possibility of asking for help in relation to other needs, such as social activities or respite.

For some parents, it was particularly frustrating not to be able to pay for informal childcare because of the potential 'double benefit' that such an arrangement could bring, for example in terms of enabling a parent to go out to work as well as enabling, say, a grandparent to retire from paid work or an unemployed friend to earn some additional money. There was some evidence of family members considering attempts to get themselves registered as childminders in order to be eligible for payment under the WTC, but the perceived feasibility of this seemed to vary. One parent, for example, described an informal carer who had considered becoming a childminder but had eventually decided against it because the registration process had appeared overly bureaucratic, and because she would have been required to make significant changes to her home environment to comply with fire regulations. Another parent, who had considered becoming a childminder herself, said she was put off because she thought she might be rejected on grounds of having a dog in the house. Further investigation of the feasibility of informal carers registering as childminders would benefit from collecting the views of these carers directly, as well as those of the parents they are helping.

5.3   Employers

The lone parents we spoke to came up with a range of measures that employers might take to make it easier for them to combine paid work with family responsibilities, many of which have been raised in previous chapters, and which raise further issues around possible policy intervention. Part-time work, particularly during school hours, was a very common preference, while opportunities for term-time working, flexible hours and job shares were also considered to be potentially helpful for lone parents. A particular worry appeared to focus on the need to leave work at short-notice in emergencies such as a child's sickness: it was common for parents to express strong concerns about this, particularly if they would not get paid for unplanned leave, suggesting that parental leave rights have done little to assuage parents' anxiety in this regard. The point was also made that employers' failure to recognise the implications of children's health made work particularly difficult for parents of children with special needs.

Some parents expressed the view that the introduction of workplace crèches would help with the logistics of managing childcare and work, as well as allowing them to feel more comfortable and reassured in the knowledge that their children were nearby and that they could get to them quickly in an emergency. For those parents who were nervous about leaving their children for the first time upon (re-)entry into work, this might be particularly attractive. Parents who mentioned workplace crèches felt that it would be the responsibility of employers, rather than the Government, to fund these, and recognised that they would probably be confined to larger employers. One lone mother had used a Civil Service workplace crèche and described the beneficial effects it had yielded in terms of staff morale.

Overall, however, it was notable that parents' demands on employers were more measured and cautious in tone than those directed towards the Government. There was a general recognition of the business costs that might be associated with 'family-friendly' policies and, particularly, of the fact that it may not be possible for small organisations to be flexible in the ways described. For this reason, some parents felt that it was the Government's role to subsidise small organisations in order to enable them to provide options such as term-time and school-hours working, or to cope in the event of a child's sickness and other kinds of unplanned absence.

But while the complexity of issues around 'family-friendly' working in different organisations was generally acknowledged, there was a feeling that *all* employers had a duty to recognise the pressures on lone parents and do what they could to accommodate them. This applied both to ongoing working practices and to recruiting lone parents in the first place, and parents saw the Government as playing a vital role in liaising with employers to increase their awareness and appreciation of lone parents' needs, even where they represented a small minority of staff. As one respondent put it, the Government has a responsibility to:

> *'make them see and make them be more understanding towards people like me.'*

(lone mother of 14-year old, nine-year-old and seven-year-old, non-worker)

In order to develop such an understanding, employers will be required to meet a number of targets, associated with such matters as avoiding discrimination during recruitment and day-to-day work, providing adequate and accessible information about parents' rights with regard to family-friendly working and maximising opportunities for flexibility, both in terms of substantive practice and in terms of general attitude and ethos. The recent evaluation of Childcare Partnership Managers showed that they were playing a role – sometimes alongside the Field Account Managers, also based in Jobcentre Plus – in encouraging employers to adopt family-friendly policies and develop an appreciation of the complex relationship between work and family responsibilities, and it may be that this role could prove particularly important for lone parents (re-) entering work (Barker *et al.* 2004).

5.4   The provision of information

The provision of information about childcare and work was another topic on which a number of policy messages emerged.

5.4.1   Information on childcare

It was clear from our research that the type and quality of information on childcare provided to lone parents could influence their attitudes, particularly towards formal childcare. However, there were a number of ways in which lone parents felt that the provision of such information could be improved.

Sources

Lone parents had received and gathered information on childcare provision from a wide variety of sources. While the most common sources of information were personal recommendation and word-of-mouth, written literature was also available to some parents via, for example, local authorities, social services, libraries, doctor's surgeries and health visitors. Some providers had also sent out their own literature, although this seemed to be more typical of private day nurseries that parents commonly considered out of their price range. Some parents had looked for information on the internet, or via directories such as the Yellow Pages or local newspapers. Other parents had relied on Jobcentre Plus or their NDLP adviser to provide information about childcare and a few had come across Children's Information Services or similar organisations, although they had typically done so '*by accident*', e.g. because an office happened to have been located near them or because they came across a representative by chance in a doctor's surgery.

However, overall, there was a strong feeling that the information that was offered to parents was fairly sparse and often irrelevant, owing to factors such as cost, location and age-appropriateness. Even where information was actively sought, it was common for parents to describe what they found as '*bitty*' or '*disjointed*', with some expressing a sense that the right information was available somewhere but very difficult to find:

> '*there is quite a lot out there, but it doesn't feel very available.*'

> (lone mother of five-year-old, worker)

These difficulties were clearly having an impact on parents' understanding of, and hence disposition towards, different types of childcare. There were few examples of lone parents who reported having come across very good sources of information and it was common for parents to know little about local provision other than what they had heard about from friends and neighbours or what they happened to have caught sight of while travelling around the area. Therefore, if information is to play a key role in facilitating lone parents' (re-)entry into work, and particularly in breaking down misconceptions about formal childcare, it would appear something needs to be done to improve the ways in which it is disseminated to parents.

Timing and methods of dissemination

Lone parents tended to wait until they became actively interested in finding childcare for their child before seeking information on the services available in their area. It would seem, therefore, that this could be the most crucial time at which to provide such information, in order to ensure that parents are fully informed about the options available to them. Overall, parents' priority in terms of childcare information was knowing where to go if and when the time came, and being able to feel confident that they would be provided with something comprehensive and up-to-date. To this end, spreading the word about Children's Information Services would seem to be key. However, if information is also to play a key role in breaking down perceived barriers and prejudices towards formal childcare, it will not be sufficient to wait for parents to seek it out themselves. Therefore, it would seem that there is also a requirement to provide some sort of childcare information on an ongoing or regular basis, so as to ensure that it is available to each parent around the time when they come to make a childcare decision.

In addition to their request for a single, well-publicised, easy-to-access source of childcare information, parents also came up with a range of specific suggestions for methods of disseminating such information. These included a '*pack*' to be sent out annually to all parents in the area, a '*childcare page*' in the local newspaper, advertisements in schools (particularly for holiday provision) and information given out through employers (although one parent made the point that this would be too late for those seeking childcare to enable them to (re-)enter work). In addition, some parents felt that providers themselves ought to be more proactive in publicising their services and, in particular, in arranging open days, as it was typically felt that having a chance to look at a setting and meet staff face-to-face was very important.

Content

While lone parents felt that the main problem with information on childcare was finding what they wanted, some parents did identify specific items of information about childcare provision that sometimes did not seem to be available to them however hard they looked. These included (in addition to addresses and telephone numbers): opening times; number of places; length of waiting lists; full information on costs; ages of children accepted; details of facilities and activities; staff's qualifications and experience; and safety and emergency provisions. Where relevant, they also felt it would be helpful to know about links between providers, e.g. whether transport was provided from a certain school to an out-of-school club, or which schools and other providers a childminder was prepared to pick up and drop off from. With respect to childminders, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the lists provided by Children's Information Services, partly because the information tended to be sparse (just name and contact details) and out-of-date, and partly because parents found that childminders were listed even when full, which meant wasting a substantial amount of time phoning around.

Personal recommendation

It seems clear, therefore, that there is a case for further government investment in improving the quality and dissemination of information on childcare services, in order to ensure that parents are fully informed about the options available to them. However, there is also one substantial caveat to this case, namely that, among the lone parents we spoke to, by far the most preferred source of information on childcare was personal recommendation – a finding supported by other research (Woodland *et al.*, 2002). It was extremely common for parents to have chosen childcare providers on this basis and they commonly cited an opportunity to meet and talk to other parents who were using a childcare provider as one of the things they would find most useful in making their choice. There was some evidence that, for certain parents, a lack of information from other sources was sometimes a factor in the value they placed on personal recommendations, and it is difficult to judge the extent to which this was a response to difficulties in accessing information in other ways. However, it seems fair to say that, to a considerable extent, the value placed on personal recommendations reflected a strong desire among parents to receive reassurance from those with whom they identified and whose opinions they respected and trusted (and indeed, some very well-informed parents - including some who actually worked in the childcare field - maintained that they would value a personal recommendation far more highly than anything else). Moreover, the power of a personal recommendation did not appear to require a great deal of familiarity between parents: in fact, some childcare recommendations were made between parents who had met for the first time at our focus groups! Conducting the groups also showed how powerful personal contact with other parents can be in shaping and changing attitudes towards particular types of providers: some parents, for example, who felt nervous at the prospect of using formal provision owing to the fact that to do so was not the 'norm' among the people they knew, appeared to feel quite encouraged by hearing about their fellow participants' positive experiences of formal care.

Personal contact between parents is a unique source of information on childcare for several reasons: because it is rooted in common experiences and concerns, because it is detailed and discursive in nature and because, unlike almost all other sources, it provides a unique combination of information and endorsement in one. One key policy question, therefore, is whether there is some way in which the Government can exploit the power of the parental recommendation as a channel for providing childcare information, perhaps by forging parental networks or setting up the kinds of group activities mentioned earlier as a way of bringing together lone parents in order to combat the isolation that can follow from being out of work. Given the potential for meaningful and trusted childcare information to overcome certain barriers to work, such as perceived norms and prejudices against formal childcare, this is perhaps particularly important. Ultimately, therefore, informing parents about childcare services may require a two-pronged approach: via formal sources such as CIS on the one hand, and with a more informal, parent-networking approach on the other.

5.4.2 Information for (re-)entering work

On the whole, parents felt that both the WTC and the NDLP had been well-publicised although there were some suggestions for improvement. Some felt that the initial NDLP letter could have been more attractive or '*enticing*' and, as we have mentioned, care needs to be taken over phrasing such communications in such a way as to appear encouraging and persuasive, but not intrusive or overly prescriptive. Parents who mentioned the WTC helpline were also generally positive about their experiences, particularly in comparison with other telephone services related to benefits and credits, and some had particularly appreciated the opportunity to receive information and advice on a confidential basis.

Aside from some parents' sense that they were being '*pressured*' into work, their main criticisms concerned the lack of a 'holistic' approach to information that might help them (re-) enter work:

> '*I don't know, I think if there was a complete information service where you could go, find out what jobs would be applicable to…like if you had children in school, within them core hours, who could also provide information on extra childminders or services out of hours for the same location, then I think it would benefit us. But the trouble is it's all so disjointed, there's nothing that pulls it all together.*'

> (lone mother of 16-year-old, 14-year-old and six-year-old, worker)

There was a suggestion that it would be useful to send out a '*bumper pack*' to all lone parents on an annual basis, covering financial and practical support as well as information on jobs and childcare. One parent suggested that a freephone number for parents who wanted to (re-)enter work could be advertised on television – an idea that might be supported by the evidence that television advertising contributed to the high awareness of the WTC. Another commented that it would be a good idea to include information about support for (re-)entering work in the pack that new mothers are offered after giving birth, so that they know where they can go for advice from the outset.

Crucially, it must be recognised that the provision of information about (re-)entering work is one element in a wider set of needs: for advice, guidance and support about the financial, practical, emotional and psychological aspects of a move into work. In particular, the need to integrate information and advice on work and childcare emerged strongly from the study, reinforcing the importance of the role of Jobcentre Plus and, in particular, Childcare Partnership Managers (CPMs). In order to maximise the potential of the service provided to lone parents by Jobcentre Plus, CPMs will need to be fully versed in local childcare provision and, ideally, working in partnership with local childcare providers and related organisations. The recent evaluation of the CPM role indicates that some progress has already been made towards this goal (Barker *et al.* 2004). Just as important, however, will be the building of strong and mutually supportive relationships between CPMs and other Jobcentre Plus staff, particularly NDLP advisers; for this reason, the evaluation's finding that some Jobcentre Plus staff have been reticent in acknowledging the

importance of childcare issues is a significant concern. The evidence from this study is clearly that Jobcentre Plus needs to recognise the integral part played by childcare and other child-related considerations in lone parents' decisions about work if it is to provide an effective holistic service for individual lone parents.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have reported on a range of policy messages that emerged, both explicitly and implicitly, from our discussions with lone parents.

5.5.1 Government initiatives

We began by discussing parents' views and experiences of the WTC. Overall, response to the WTC was positive, with some parents reporting that it had made a great difference to their lives, perhaps even enabling them to (re-)enter work. The fact that, for some parents, the WTC had opened up the possibility of part-time work, which, in turn, had made entering the labour market a realistic and/or desirable option, was a key finding here. It was also noted that the childcare element of the WTC could be particularly beneficial to parents who did not have access to informal care, and some parents expressed the view that the subsidy had brought formal childcare within their reach for the first time.

Some parents, however, felt that the Government could improve the support it offered lone parents through the WTC. For example, some had experienced difficulties finding affordable childcare in spite of receiving the childcare element, and there was a suggestion that lone parents ought to be treated preferentially in this respect due to their perceived greater need, particularly where 'shift-parenting' opportunities were not available. For other parents, the problems were more associated with operation than amount: the point made in Chapter 3, for example, that the payment of WTC in arrears typically implies that parents are initially responsible for their own childcare costs when moving into work, was reiterated here. Some parents also highlighted the way that any decisions about changes to their work arrangements had to be viewed in the light of the implications for their WTC claim, and it was suggested that parents might even be discouraged from progressing in their careers if they worked out that taking on more hours or accepting a promotion would leave them worse off overall. Finally, some parents expressed disappointment at the fact that the childcare element of the WTC was not available to those working under 16 hours a week, as this restricted the extent to which they could (re-)enter work gradually, perhaps building up their working hours in line with a gradual building-up of childcare. For parents who were nervous about entering work and/or starting to use childcare, this could potentially represent a significant deterrent from work.

We have already mentioned parents' experiences of the NDLP, as part of the discussion of making decisions about work in Chapter Three. In this chapter, we reiterated the key message that relationships with NDLP advisers worked best where they were not focused solely on the job-seeking process, but where they were more

collaborative, individualised and holistic in nature. This sort of approach might involve, for example, taking into account a parent's particular barriers to work, such as health or literacy problems, nervousness or a lack of confidence. It also implies that an NDLP adviser needs to develop a detailed understanding of the sort of work a parent wants, both in terms of pragmatic factors such as hours and location, but also in terms of their long-term career aspirations; it emerged strongly from the study that some lone parents want opportunities to develop careers, through education and training, for example, and not all are prepared to accept the first job that ticks the boxes of their 'better-off calculation'. Finally, a crucial element of a productive NDLP experience was seen to require advisers to get involved with lone parents' childcare needs. Work and childcare tend to be closely and inextricably linked in the lives of lone parents, and it therefore makes sense to deal with them together; to this end, the role of Childcare Partnership Managers is likely to be important, both in facilitating the dissemination of childcare information through Jobcentre Plus, and in encouraging employers to gain a greater understanding of the challenges facing the lone parents who work for them.

In Section 5.1.3, we discussed how lone parents viewed the overall approach the Government had taken towards them in terms of guidance and encouragement with regard to paid work. Here, the main message was a cautionary one: that, in spite of the positive steps taken through initiatives such as the WTC and the NDLP, the Government needed to be careful to recognise and support the full diversity of lifestyles adopted by lone parents, and in particular to be sensitive to the needs of those lone parents who cannot or choose not to work. In particular, there were some suggestions for ways in which the Government could support parents who elected not to work for varying periods of time: these included increased financial support during a child's early life, enabling parents to settle children into childcare before entering work, as well as other measures to combat the negative aspects of being a non-working lone parent, such as increased opportunities for voluntary work and the development of local parent networks.

In Chapter 6, we will go on to discuss ways in which the Government might seek to tailor its interventions according to lone parents' different work and parental care orientations.

5.5.2   Childcare

Section 5.2.1 focused on messages about formal childcare. The main policy messages with regard to pre-school care concerned a lack of places in day nurseries and a perceived 'two-tier' system, wherein high quality private nurseries catered for well-off parents, while less affluent families had only poorer-quality council-run provision available to them. Parents also complained of inflexibility in the approaches of day care providers, who were often reported to insist on regular and/or substantial patterns of attendance, which may have been difficult to fit around other aspects of parents' lives.

For parents of school-age children, out-of-school and holiday care were key areas of concern. One strong message concerned the need for more affordable out-of-school care, at least between the hours of 8am and 6pm, although lone parents working full-time or atypical hours, or with long journeys between work and school(s), may require care even earlier and/or later in the day. We came across several instances where out-of-school clubs had been closed down or failed to materialise, which may have been linked to problems of financial viability; lone parents were typically prepared to pay only a small fee for this sort of care. Flexibility was also an issue with regard to both out-of-school and holiday care, with some parents reporting that these services would be most useful if they were available for use on an ad hoc basis, rather than requiring parents to commit to a regular pattern of care in advance. With regard to holiday care, the main problems were, again, availability and cost, with some lone parents describing scenarios where a child's name had to be put down for a holiday club months in advance in order to secure a place. The six-week summer holiday was described as a uniquely difficult, *'nightmare'* time, and some parents who used substantial amounts of informal care across the year tended to feel it was unfeasible or unacceptable to ask friends and relatives to provide full-time care for such a long period.

In Section 5.2.2, we moved on to focus on informal childcare. Here, the strongest message emerging from the study was that informal carers ought to be eligible for subsidy under the WTC. A range of potential benefits were cited, including the suggestion that lone parents would feel more comfortable and less guilty about requesting childcare from friends and family members. Being able to pay informal carers might have the 'double benefit' of helping the lone parent and also helping the carer (for example, if the payment enabled a grandparent to retire). It was also noted that some informal carers actually *spend* money in the course of providing care (e.g. on food or transport) and that lone parents were not always able to cover these costs.

5.5.3   The workplace

In Section 5.3, we looked at ways in which the Government might intervene in the workplace to improve the support provided by employers for lone parents, primarily in terms of promoting a 'family-friendly' approach. It was notable that parents were relatively reticent in the demands they placed at the employer's door, with the point made that it could be particularly difficult for small organisations to adopt family-friendly practices. Nevertheless, many of the components of 'suitable work' discussed in Chapter 3 fell into the category of family-friendly working, and lone parents supported the Government's role in encouraging employers to offer options such as part-time work (especially school-hours working), flexible hours and job shares, and to take a flexible and sympathetic approach to unplanned leave, especially in relation to children's sickness. Some parents were also positive about the idea of workplace crèches, which they felt would make the logistics of combining work and care easier, and there was some evidence that workplace childcare might be particularly attractive to those who were nervous about leaving

their children for the first time on (re-)entering work. Finally, there was a sense that the Government had a responsibility to help employers develop a deeper understanding of the challenges facing lone parents, which, in turn, would help tackle discrimination and other barriers to work. This might be an area in which Childcare Partnership Managers and other Jobcentre Plus staff could play a key role.

5.5.4 Information on childcare and work

In Section 5.4, we discussed in detail the ways in which lone parents had received information about childcare, as well as information to help them (re-) enter work.

While lone parents knew of a range of sources of childcare information, the overall feeling was that relevant and sufficiently detailed information was very difficult to find. Parents generally felt that the burden was on them to go out and seek the information they needed, but even those who had taken a proactive approach had found it difficult to uncover certain specific items of useful information and, while they felt the information they needed may be out there somewhere, its provision appeared '*bitty'* and *'disjointed'.* Parents' top priority was for the Government to provide a single, well-publicised, easily accessible source of childcare information for them to use as and when they needed it. However, considerable evidence also emerged from the study indicating that childcare information could play a key role in overcoming misconceptions, prejudices and resistance to using formal childcare and, hence, in encouraging and facilitating parents to (re-)enter work. Therefore, from a policy perspective, some strategy of active dissemination of this information could also prove worthwhile, particularly if it were able to target the point at which a parent makes a childcare decision. Moreover, it was important to note that the parents we spoke to typically assigned a special value to recommendations from other parents, over and above more formal sources. This would suggest that the Government may be well-advised to invest in the development of local parent networks alongside other formal sources.

As well as suggestions for ways of disseminating childcare information, parents came up with a number of ways in which they might be offered advice on (re-) entering work, including a 'bumper pack' of information to be sent annually to lone parents and a freephone advice line advertised on television. However, the key message on this topic mirrored earlier discussion of the NDLP: namely that advice and support on work, childcare and other issues ought to be integrated and holistic and sensitive to the needs and wants of the individual parent. In the next chapter, we will explore ways in which the Government ensure that various kinds of intervention are sensitive to the differing needs of lone parent families.

6   Conclusion

We start the chapter by summarising the key research findings and showing how these build on the existing body of evidence on different aspects of lone parents' relationships to work and the role that childcare plays in these relationships. We then revisit the policy messages discussed in Chapter 5 and consider how various types of intervention might be required to support lone parent families in different circumstances and with a variety of needs. The complexity involved in coming to decisions about work and childcare, and the different types of support lone parents need, both during the transition into work and once they have entered employment, suggest that while some policy responses might be appropriate for all lone parents, they can be more effective if tailored differently in order to meet the diverse needs of individual lone parent families.

6.1   Answering the research questions

As discussed in Chapter 1, since the introduction of the National Childcare Strategy in 1998, considerable research has been carried out to explore (lone) parents' labour market behaviour and how childcare issues affect their employment decisions. In the light of recent and imminent policy changes this study was commissioned to build on the existing body of evidence and to address three overarching research questions, namely:

• What are the factors that underpin parents' views and attitudes towards (parental and non-parental) childcare and work?

• How are lone parents' decisions about childcare (and the perceived choices and constraints) balanced with decisions about work?

• How do lone parents manage or negotiate childcare within working life?

Before exploring the policy implications of this study, we summarise the key findings from the previous chapters and consider how these build on the existing evidence on different aspects of lone parents' relationships to work, and the role played by childcare within these.

6.1.1 Attitudes and beliefs about childcare and work

As discussed in Chapter 1, most studies on childcare have focused on analysing the relationship between parental characteristics and the use of different types of non-parental childcare. These studies have consistently shown that use of (formal) childcare is more common among highly educated mothers in skilled occupations, two parent families and those living in more affluent areas. Use of formal provision (among pre-school children) also tends to increase with the age of the child. While patterns of childcare use might be expected to reflect to some extent parental preferences, difficulties in accessing childcare services could result in a mismatch between what parents would ideally like and what they are able to obtain. The results on the more limited research on childcare preferences are not always in line with the findings on patterns of childcare use. For example, highly qualified non-working mothers are more likely than others to say that they are not in paid employment because they want to look after the children themselves or because the children would suffer if they went out to work. These reasons for not working are also more likely to be cited by partnered than lone mothers (La Valle *et al.*, 2000; Woodland *et al.*, 2002).

These findings indicate that low levels of childcare use among some groups might be partly related to barriers in accessing childcare services, as well as pointing to the complex interplay of factors that shape parents' attitudes and beliefs about childcare and parenting. It is in relation to the latter that this study has filled a gap in knowledge. By developing a typology of work and parental care orientations, this study has shown how lone parents' deep-seated beliefs about two key aspects of their lives can pull them into two different directions; for example, if they have a strong attachment to work combined with a high predisposition towards parental childcare. Understanding the interaction between these two orientations, and how this shapes attitudes towards work, parenting and childcare can be very important in gaining a better understanding of how various types of policy intervention might be more or less effective for parents with different combinations of work and parental care orientation.

6.1.2 Work and childcare decisions

Another way in which this study has contributed to enhancing our understanding of lone parents' labour market behaviour and childcare arrangements is by making a clear analytical distinction between the influences that underpin parents' beliefs and attitudes towards work and childcare, and the more pragmatic factors that shape employment and childcare decisions. While these are closely linked and decisions are clearly strongly influenced by attitudes, maintaining a conceptual distinction between the two, and understanding what might facilitate or hinder lone parents' ability to make the work and childcare decisions that best suit their and their children's needs, is very important from a policy point of view.

In Chapter 3, we explored in considerable depth the range of 'parent-centred' and 'child-centred' factors that shape the decisions of lone parents with different

combinations of work and parental care orientation, and the compromises parents might have to make in an attempt to strike a balance between these factors. Of particular policy relevance was the exploration of the different 'models' that guide parents' final decisions on whether or not to take up paid employment. These could range from the highly desirable 'calculation' model, which was more likely to result in an optimal work-childcare solution, to models that could limit lone parents' choices considerably: the study has highlighted how adequate information, advice and support can help parents to move towards the 'calculation' model, thus enhancing their chances of achieving what they consider to be a satisfactory balance between their roles as workers and as parents.

In the same way as previous studies, this research has looked at the range of criteria parents consider in judging the suitability of different work and childcare arrangements. However, this study has perhaps gone further than most others by linking these choices and decisions to different combinations of work and parental care orientation, thus explaining why what might be a perfectly acceptable or even highly desirable arrangement for one parent could be considered unacceptable by another. Again this goes back to the fact that 'what works?' in terms of policy intervention cannot be considered in isolation from two other key questions: 'for whom?' and 'under what circumstances?'. Another key issue addressed in this chapter, which again had previously been explored to a limited extent, concerns the 'chicken or egg?' dilemma that parents face during the transition into paid work. Our research findings have highlighted how it can be difficult, if not impossible, for parents to synchronise decisions about childcare and work arrangements; how this adds to the pressure lone parents already face during what is typically a very stressful period; and the very positive role policy intervention (for example the NDLP) can play at this stage.

6.1.3   Balancing childcare and work

The third question addressed by this study is also not new. The problem of juggling childcare and work is an issue that has attracted considerable attention ever since the traditional family model of a male breadwinner and a female carer started to decline, and the number of mothers in paid employment began to grow. What is new about this study, however, is the in-depth analysis of how lone parents coordinate their work-time with childcare-education time to ensure continuity of children's care. This builds on previous work by one of the report's authors (Skinner, 2003).

The key role played by geography and transport in coordinating work, education and care was highlighted in Chapter 4, where we saw that lone parents had developed a range of strategies to tackle coordination problems, including creating proximity between home, work, childcare and education settings. Our findings also show how such strategies might be closely linked to negotiations with employers regarding working hours, and with family and friends regarding informal childcare arrangements and coordination support. This highlights important policy implications, including how coordination difficulties might act as disincentives to work; how the

lack of support from the non-resident parent might imply considerable time costs for lone parents; and how changes in employment policies could play a crucial role in supporting parents who are considerably disadvantaged by having to face these problems alone.

6.2   Lone parents typology and policy intervention

In the rest of the chapter, we will revisit the policy messages discussed in Chapter 5 to highlight the kinds of factors that should inform policy intervention in order to ensure that initiatives are effectively targeted, and to meet the needs of different lone parent families. We will use the typology of work and parental care orientation developed in Chapter 2 (Figure 2.1, Section 2.3) to indicate how policy responses can be tailored to the needs of parents with different views about work and childcare. Before we proceed, however, two important issues need to be borne in mind.

First, it is important to remember that, while the typology is useful to gain a better understanding of how policy might be more effectively targeted at different groups, like all theoretical models, it somewhat simplifies a very complex reality. As we saw in Chapter 2, parents are typically situated at some point along a continuum with regard to both their work and parental care orientations, rather than at the extremes. Furthermore, lone parents do move along these continua as their circumstances change and in response to new opportunities and challenges. To some extent, therefore, support in the areas discussed in Chapter 5 could potentially benefit all lone parents, and in highlighting below which of these might be particularly effective or useful for some types of lone parents, we are not implying that this is the **only** kind of support they might need, but that this is probably the **minimum** they would require to consider taking up employment or to remain in work.

Secondly, as we have seen, the research findings do point to some areas where better information, advice and support might contribute to changing lone parents' views about work and childcare. However, underpinning our recommendations is the assumption that rather than trying to (radically) change parents' deep-seated beliefs and attitudes about work and childcare, policy intervention should, to some extent, be adapted to reflect this diversity of views and preferences.

The employment and childcare policy priorities for different types of lone parents are summarised in Table 6.1 and discussed in detail in the rest of the chapter.

Table 6.1   Parent types and priorities for policy intervention

Parent type	Employment intervention	Childcare intervention
Type 1: high work & high parental care orientation	- Flexible working arrangements available in all job types - Control over working hours, including atypical hours - Extended paid maternity or parental leave (e.g. for one year) the 'settle in' period	- Better information on childcare services with an emphasis on recommendations from other parents - Childcare 'tasters' - (Financial support for informal carers) - Financial support for childcare during - Childcare measures targeted at those with older pre-school and school-age children
Type 2: high work & lower parental care orientation	- Level of employment flexibility required largely dependent on flexibility of childcare provision parents need them	- More affordable day care provision - More out-of-school and holiday childcare - Services that are available when lone - Childcare and education settings located in close proximity
Type 3: lower work & high parental care orientation	- Learning opportunities - Voluntary work	- Better information on childcare combined with information on learning and voluntary work opportunities - Childcare 'tasters' provided in combination with short training or advice sessions - Childcare provided with courses and voluntary work - Financial support for childcare during the 'settle in' period-Childcare measures targeted at those with older pre-school and school-age children
Type 4: lower work & parental care orientation	- Learning and voluntary work opportunities, although direct entry into work also an option - Support to deal with the 'financial gap' associated with the transition into work - Strengthen family-friendly legislation	- All measures listed under Type 2 but with more affordable provision/financial help to pay for childcare being particularly important

6.3   Type 1: high work and parental care orientation

As discussed in Chapter 2, Type 1 lone parents had a high work orientation combined with a high disposition towards parental care. These parents were typically better qualified than those with a lower work orientation. However, alongside their strong work identities, these lone parents saw the need to look after the children themselves as equally important. This did not necessarily mean that they did not use or would not consider using non-parental care, but they did tend to have stronger views than other parents about how much and how regularly childcare should be used for children at different life stages. Owing to their high work and parental care orientations, Type 1 parents experienced the greatest tension in trying

to reconcile their aspirations as workers and as parents, and this pointed to the need for intervention aimed at reducing this tension.

6.3.1 Implications for employment policy

Flexible work

Owing to the underlying tensions experienced by Type 1 parents, the work decisions of these parents were typically characterised by compromises and trade-offs. These could work out well for some parents, but prove unsatisfactory for others. For example, in order to work, some of these parents spent less time with their children than they would have liked; alternatively, they may have opted to put their careers on hold or find jobs that were far less than ideal in terms of career prospects, in order to be able to spend enough time with their children. Access to flexible employment (e.g. part-time, term-time, school hours) can therefore be crucial to enable these parents to enter and stay in employment, as it can provide what they perceive as being the right balance between their roles as workers and as parents. It would also be important for flexible employment to be widely available and not to be limited to certain types of work: as we have seen earlier, some lone parents felt that they had to choose between, on the one hand, demanding and 'family-unfriendly' jobs that met their career aspirations, and, on the other, less demanding but far less interesting and rewarding jobs that enabled them to spend sufficient time with their children.

As we saw in Chapter 4, flexible employment could also play a key role in simplifying the coordination and management of childcare and work, and small adjustments in working hours could go a long way to simplifying these arrangements. Less complex coordination and management arrangements could also reduce the need for others to get involved, something that again might be particularly important for parents who want to maximise the time they spend with their children.

In Chapter 4 we also saw that in workplaces where family-friendly employment policies had been introduced and practices were well-established, lone parents could generally negotiate working arrangements that met their needs. However, despite the introduction in recent years of legislation to support working parents, some of the lone parents we spoke to still seemed to have little control and choice over their working hours. Even when flexible arrangements were negotiated with employers, some lone parents felt they had been required to pay a disproportionately high price in order to obtain a relative small amount of flexibility. These findings seem to suggest that some aspects of family-friendly legislation might need to be tightened up in order to be effective and accessible to all lone parents.

Work at atypical hours

The issue of work at non-standard hours is also relevant here. Typically the lone parents in our study could not count on the support of the non-resident parent; therefore jobs that required a substantial number of atypical hours would inevitably involve using a considerable amount of non-parental care, something that parents

with a high parental care orientation might find unacceptable. This is an issue that affects lone parents in particular, as among dual parent families atypical working hours and shift-parenting can be used to minimise or even eliminate the need for non-parental care, and to maximise the time children spend with their parents (La Valle *et al.*, 2002a). Policies aimed at regulating atypical working hours could therefore be particularly beneficial to lone parents.

Parental leave

A high disposition towards parental care was particularly evident in relation to young children, where perhaps the more 'extreme' beliefs were found. For example, there were lone parents who would never have considered working in the first year or two of their child's life, as this was believed to be a crucial formative period when parental care was essential and could not be satisfactorily substituted by other types of care. These beliefs were very deeply held and it is difficult to see what type of intervention could have changed these in favour of non-parental care; furthermore, recent research on the benefits of parental care in the first year of a child's life suggests that there might be good evidence to support these views (Melhuish, 2004). Therefore, extending (paid) maternity leave, to a year for example, or introducing paid parental leave for a similar length of time, might be an effective way of supporting those with a high parental care orientation in their decision to stay at home for the early part of a child's life. Such measures would mean that parents would not be faced with what might be considered an unacceptable option (i.e. going back to work when the child is far too young); it would also maintain a crucial link with employment and could represent a strong incentive to return. Extending paid parental leave would also have the advantage of 'keeping up the momentum' and avoiding some of the negative effects on work orientation that might be associated with longer employment breaks (see Chapter 3). The advantages of extending the period of maternity or parental leave would, of course, need to be weighed up against any potential negative impact on family finances and living standards, although this would of course largely depend on the level of payment made available during this period.

Some Type 1 parents believed even a child in his/her second year of life to be too young to be left in non-parental care. However, the evidence from this study suggests that parents' willingness to consider using non-parental care seems to increase as the child's age increases, and various childcare options, particularly if combined with flexible and part-time employment, might seem more acceptable at this stage in a child's life, than, for example, when a child is under one.

6.3.2 Implications for childcare policy

Information on childcare

Commonly implicit in a strong disposition towards parental care was a reluctance to use non-parental care, and formal provision in particular. As discussed, this did not necessarily mean that parents had ruled certain types of childcare out altogether,

but rather that they had strong views regarding the types and amount of childcare that would be appropriate (and beneficial) for a child at different life stages. While no parent would knowingly take any risks when choosing childcare, those with a strong parental orientation seemed to be extremely 'cautious' when making childcare decisions. This may have reflected a belief that parental care was superior to other types of care, and that finding something that approached the very high standard set by parental care would prove difficult. Therefore, while the suggestions discussed in Chapter 5 to meet parents' childcare information needs obviously apply to all lone parents, they could be particularly effective for this group, given their strong reservations about non-parental childcare. In particular, the opportunity to hear the views and recommendations of other parents about formal childcare providers might prove particularly helpful and reassuring for this group (see Chapter 5 for a full discussion of how informal networks could help to influence parents' views and decisions about childcare).

'Suitable' childcare

Opportunities to 'try out' a childcare provider before making a final decision, and perhaps to use it for a small number of hours (which may or may not be increased over time), are also options that might encourage these 'cautious' parents to consider using formal provision. This relates to the Childcare Tasters programme targeted at lone parents that is currently being piloted by the Government.

As discussed, parents' willingness to consider non-parental care seems to increase as the child's age increases; therefore, measures targeted at expanding provision for older children (e.g. wraparound provision for three and four-year-olds, out-of-school childcare) might be more effective in encouraging Type 1 parents to try formal childcare than efforts to expand day care for younger children. However, it will be interesting to see how the introduction of free early years education for two-year-olds (to be piloted in some areas in 2006) affects the views of lone parents. As with three- and four-year-olds, the combination of an emphasis on the educational element of this type of provision and the fact that it will be universally and freely available could result in early years education for two-year-olds coming to be perceived as the 'norm'. This, in turn, could encourage lone parents to see (a small amount) of wraparound care as appropriate or acceptable, particularly if provided in the same setting as early years education for three-year-old children.

Informal care

It was not unusual for a high parental orientation to be accompanied by a preference for informal care, and grandparental care in particular. As discussed in Chapter 5, some respondents believed that financial help for informal carers should be provided by the state in recognition of the key role that they play in providing support to lone parents and the costs some of them incur in providing this care. The availability of financial support for informal carers might make it easier for some lone parents to access this kind of help and also enable them to use more of it, as the lack

of some form of payment can limit the amount of help lone parents feel able to ask for, as well as the amount informal carers are willing to provide.

This kind of intervention could potentially be particularly effective for Type 1 parents, who seemed to have a preference for informal care and might not even consider other types of provision. However, the evidence from other research regarding the perceived appropriateness and effectiveness of paying informal carers is mixed as far as grandparents are concerned (Arthur *et al.*, 2003). As we saw in Chapter 4, it is hard to separate out where duty, obligation and altruism begin and end in relationships between parents and grandparents. It is not always easy to tell which of these underpins the provision of grandparental childcare and how arrangements might be affected by money exchanges. Relationships with other extended family members and friends were more likely to operate on the basis of reciprocity, perhaps suggesting than financial support could be more effective in these cases; however, the evidence from this and other studies in this regard is thin on the ground.

Childcare and the transition into work

Finally, given their 'nervousness', about using non-parental care, some childcare support might be required by Type 1 parents during the transition into work. As we have seen, this was typically a very stressful period for some lone parents, characterised by a high level of uncertainty. The high parental care orientation of Type 1 parents suggests that they might be more willing to take up work if they could sort out their childcare arrangements first and, for example, be satisfied that their children had settled into the new setting before they started work. In the case of formal providers, this could have considerable financial implications and without some kind of financial help to cover the costs of the 'settle in', period, some lone parents would almost certainly not be able to afford to organise the transition in this way. Extending financial support for childcare to cover a short period before parents start working could therefore play an important part in enabling these parents to take up paid employment.

6.4 Type 2: high work orientation and lower parental care orientation

Lone parents in this group had a high work orientation and a lower disposition towards parental care, and seemed comfortable with the idea of using non-parental care. Again these were typically well-qualified and skilled lone parents who saw themselves as being in a 'career' and had always assumed they would return to work after having children. Becoming a lone parent had, in some cases, even strengthened a Type 2 parent's orientation towards work, as he or she had become the breadwinner or felt a renewed need to provide a working role model for the children. Compared with Type 1 parents, this group was less likely to experience tensions in trying to reconcile their aspirations as workers and as parents. Nevertheless, they had experienced practical problems, which had made it difficult or even

impossible for them to work. These difficulties could also considerably reduce their employment options and prevent them from being in the type of job that best met their career aspirations.

6.4.1   Implications for employment policy

In contrast with Type 1 parents, the availability of flexible work was not necessarily a precondition for working among Type 2 parents, who were generally more willing to consider full-time employment, for example. However, lack of access to (affordable) childcare and the inflexibility of formal services (e.g. in terms of opening times) might mean that, in practice, working was only an option if the job was sufficiently flexible to fit with school hours and the available childcare. Similarly, while these lone parents might not have been against the idea of working atypical hours in principle, the lack of formal provision available at these times, and the absence of shift-parenting arrangements with the non-resident parent, would typically mean that this option could only be considered if informal care was available to cover these times.

So while currently these lone parents would benefit from access to more flexible employment, if the childcare obstacles discussed in the previous chapter and summarised below could be removed, many of the problems they faced in combining work with parenting might be resolved.

6.4.2   Implications for childcare policy

As discussed, generally speaking Type 2 parents were more comfortable than their Type 1 counterparts with the idea of using non-parental childcare. Therefore, the kinds of childcare measures that would be particularly suitable for the more 'cautious' Type 1 parents would not be so crucial for this group, although, like all parents, Type 2 parents would also benefit from information (and reassurance) about standards of quality and safety, and about the services available from different providers.

However, the main problems these lone parents faced were more likely to be related to what they perceived as the inadequacy of childcare services, particularly if they had no or limited access to informal care. As discussed in previous chapters, the poor availability and high cost of pre-school provision could be a major barrier to work for lone parents with young children; the scarcity and unreliability of out-of-school clubs was also a problem for some. Another key obstacle was the inflexibility of providers: this meant fixed opening times, but also referred to the need to book (and pay for) fixed slots as much as a term in advance, as well as problems securing part-time provision, or the fact that part-time places were only offered in a certain 'format' (e.g. parents could use half days or certain days of the week, but not both). As we saw in Chapter 4, the geographical location of provision was also crucial as it could prove very problematic for lone parents to coordinate work, childcare and education if the settings involved were not in close proximity. These coordination

difficulties could be compounded by a lack of adequate transport if, for example, lone parents did not have a car, or lacked access to good public transport.

6.5 Type 3: lower work orientation and high parental care orientation

Type 3 lone parents had a lower work orientation and a high disposition towards parental care. These were typically low qualified and low skilled lone parents with limited work experience, and even those who had spent many years in employment did not see themselves as having had a 'career'. These lone parents tended to view motherhood as a 'job' in its own right and therefore paid employment was perceived as something that would impinge upon their 'job' as parent. This did not necessarily mean that these parents did not work or would never consider taking up paid employment, but the options they would consider tended to be limited (e.g. a 'small' job once the children were in full-time education). Because of their lower work orientation these lone parents experienced few tensions in trying to reconcile paid work and parenting: if they could not find a job that fitted with the children and their views on parenting, remaining out of paid work did not seem too big a sacrifice to make.

These parents might benefit from the same kinds of intervention as their Type 1 counterparts in terms of responding to their strong disposition towards parental childcare. However, a more fundamental question needs to be addressed first: namely how policy can be refined to create an environment that makes paid employment more attractive to this group. This might, in turn, influence to some extent their views about childcare.

Before moving on to look at this, however, it should be noted that some Type 3 lone parents had made legitimate lifestyle decisions to stay at home and look after their children (especially very young children). Therefore, whilst measures to enhance their employability and keep work skills up-to-date could still be valuable, some of these parents might simply not be prepared to enter paid employment until their children have grown up.

6.5.1 Implications for employment policy

A lower work orientation was typically rooted in low academic achievement and low aspirations and expectations when lone parents left full-time education. In terms of policy priority, therefore, dealing with these issues, and raising these parents' work aspirations and confidence, must be dealt with before or alongside other work and childcare issues.

We have discussed a number of ways in which this could be achieved, for example, by making learning opportunities available, which could provide gateways into paid employment. Previous research has shown that parents return to education for a range of reasons and undertake a great variety of courses and training, which might or might not be directly linked to work. However, with the right kind of support,

including suitable learning options, family-friendly learning environments, financial and childcare support, engaging in learning has the potential of having a profound and long-term impact on parents' work motivations (La Valle *et al.*, 2002b). Furthermore, learning has the advantage of being seen by some parents as a way of entering work gradually and as being potentially flexible; both features particularly important for those whose high parental care orientations had led to a great concern about how 'non-parenting' activities might fit in with their children's needs.

Voluntary work was also perceived as another flexible and gradual way of entering paid employment, which again appeared potentially highly compatible with lone parents' childcare needs. It was also typically undertaken in what were considered 'safe' or familiar environments (e.g. school and childcare settings), thus providing an ideal way of exposing parents who had had long break from paid employment, or had never had a 'proper' job, to the world of work.

A crucial feature of both learning and voluntary work, which made them particularly appealing to parents with a lower work orientation and low earning potential, was the low or even absent financial risk, combined with the opportunity of increasing their earnings potential. Unlike most paid employment, which required lone parents to give up the *'security'* of being on benefits and could be perceived as entailing considerable financial risk, studying and voluntary work were seen as low-risk or even risk-free ways of gaining valuable experience and skills, and of exploring different employment options. Furthermore, through learning and voluntary work, parents could enhance their employability and their prospects of securing a 'decently' paid job, which in turn might lead to a greater disposition towards work.

6.5.2   Implications for childcare policy

The childcare needs of Type 3 lone parents were very similar to those of Type 1 parents, reflecting their high disposition towards parental care and their associated reservations about non-parental care. However, the need to enhance their employability and financial considerations represented two important additional dimensions to the kind of policy intervention that might be particularly useful for this group. For Type 3 parents, comprehensive information about childcare services could be particularly effective if combined with information about ways of enhancing their employability; for example, courses or voluntary work opportunities that provide childcare facilities.

Combining childcare with activities aimed at enhancing lone parents' employability could also have the added advantage of enabling these parents to 'try out' formal childcare, which would enable them to assess how they and their children reacted to it without having to make a long term commitment. For example, childcare provided (free or at low cost) as part of a short course or a training and advice session, possibly on the site where the parents' activities take place, could serve the function of a childcare 'taster session'.

Like Type 1 parents, the need to see the children settled in their new childcare setting could be essential before these parents were prepared to take up work, and again

the financial implications of this would need to be addressed. Owing to their low earnings potential and limited employment options, the perceived financial risk associated with the 'wrong' decision (e.g. a childcare arrangement that proved unsatisfactory) could be particularly high among this group, and therefore providing the opportunity and the financial support to allow them to assess the suitability of their new childcare arrangements could be very important.

Finally, as we saw earlier, a high disposition towards parental care was particularly evident in relation to very young children. The measures discussed above might therefore be more effectively targeted at lone parents with older pre-school and school-age children. When children enter (early years) education, even parents with a high parental care orientation have to come to terms with leaving their children in the care of others, and psychologically this can represent an important step towards the acceptance of other types of non-parental (formal) provision.

6.6   Type 4: lower work and parental care orientation

Type 4 lone parents had lower orientations towards both work and parental care. Like Type 3 respondents, these were typically low-qualified and low-skilled parents who did not see themselves as having had a 'career'. These parents seemed happy in principle with the idea of using non-parental care although, in practice, because they were not working, they had never been confronted with the need to use it on a regular basis. A high work and/or parental care orientation among other types of parents clearly highlighted the kind of trade-offs and choices they had made or considered making in relation to work and childcare. However, it could be more difficult to explore these with Type 4 parents, as it appeared that their position as full-time parents was typically something that 'just happened', rather than being the result of deeply held beliefs about their roles as parents. As discussed in Chapter 2, we also had limited data on these parents as very few were found somewhere near both extremes (i.e. lower work and parental care). It is therefore somewhat more difficult to assess what would work well for this group, and the policy suggestions below are more speculative than those concerning the other types of lone parents.

6.6.1   Implications for employment policy

Like Type 3 parents, providing learning and voluntary work opportunities could prove an effective way of dealing with the lower attachment to work typical of this group. However, because these parents seemed to be comfortable with the idea of using non-parental care, key features of these routes into work that might make them attractive to lone parents with a high parental care orientation (e.g. gradual entry and flexibility) might be less important here, and Type 4 parents might respond equally well to opportunities to enter paid work directly.

Type 4 parents are probably just as likely as Type 3 parents to see learning and voluntary work as low-risk ways of exploring employment options, as well as opportunities to enhance employability and earnings potential. However, because these parents' decisions about entering paid employment might be largely driven by

financial factors, better support to deal with the financial 'gap' associated with the transition into work (see Chapter 3) might again make paid employment seem more feasible for this group, without the need for prior efforts to enhance employability.

Measures to strengthen family-friendly legislation could also particularly benefit this group; owing to their relatively weak labour market position, these lone parents might currently be less able than others to secure flexible working arrangements. As we have seen, inflexible working arrangements can mean that lone parents are simply not able to combine a job with the available childcare arrangements, and can thus make the management and coordination of work, childcare and education unfeasible.

6.6.2   Implications for childcare policy

As discussed, it would appear that Type 4 parents might be comfortable with the idea of using non-parental care, so the kind of childcare intervention that would be particularly suitable for more cautious parents (Types 1 and 3) might not be so crucial here. However, even if this was the case, these parents would still be faced with the range of childcare problems discussed in Section 6.4.2. Among the childcare obstacles highlighted above, probably the main one for these parents would be affordability. On one hand, owing to their disposition towards non-parental (and formal) care, some of these parents might be likely to take advantage of the financial support available for childcare through the WTC. On the other hand, their low earnings potential might mean that they would simply not be able to afford the childcare costs not covered by the WTC (due to a combination of a low-paid job and high childcare costs, for example, or to a substantial need for childcare and/or high childcare costs in their local area).

6.7   Conclusion

6.7.1   Lone parents' views, decisions and management of childcare and work

By developing a typology of work and parental care orientations, this study has shown how lone parents' deep seated beliefs about two key aspects of their lives can pull them into different directions, for example, if they have a strong attachment to work combined with a high predisposition towards parental childcare. Another way in which this study has contributed to enhancing our understanding of lone parents' labour market behaviour and childcare arrangements is by making a clear analytical distinction between the influences that underpin parents' beliefs and attitudes towards work and childcare, and the more pragmatic factors that shape employment and childcare decisions. This distinction is potentially very important from a policy point of view, as intervention at the 'decision' level could prove to be more effective in removing barriers to work and childcare use than intervention which might be mainly aimed at (radically) changing parents' deeply held beliefs about parenting,

childcare and work. The study has also explored an aspect of managing work and parenting which had been largely ignored by previous research, namely how lone parents coordinate their work-time with their children's childcare/education time to ensure continuity of children's care. The study has highlighted the key role played by geography and transport, the strategies lone parents develop to create proximity between home, work, childcare and education settings, and the ways in which these might be closely linked to negotiations with employers and informal carers.

While many of the childcare and employment issues discussed throughout the report could apply equally to all parents (partnered and lone), a key theme emerging from this study is that lone parents are **alone** and thus face specific obstacles and challenges. This should underpin any policy responses targeted at this group. As we have seen, the absence of the other parent can also have an impact on attitudes towards work, as well as on views about parenting and non-parental care. Being without a partner can also make decisions about work very complex: for example, it can have a considerable influence on the perceived financial risk of taking up paid work. Moreover, employment options can be considerably limited by the lack of support with childcare, and with arrangements for coordinating and managing work, education and care. While combining paid work and parenting is stressful for many parents, this study has highlighted the pressure and strains of making a transition into work without the support of a partner, as well as the stress and sheer physical exhaustion that can be suffered by parents shouldering financial, parenting and domestic responsibilities alone.

6.7.2   Policy implications

This study has shown that in order to maximise their effectiveness, policy responses must be tailored to the needs of parents with different orientations towards work and parental childcare.

As we have seen, a high parental care orientation requires family-friendly employment practices that maximise the time parents have to spend with their children, and it would appear that current work-life balance legislation might need to be tightened up in order to meet the needs of these parents. Extended paid maternity/parental leave could also prove an effective way of supporting this group. Childcare measures targeted at those with high parental care orientation also need to reflect their 'cautious' approach towards non-parental care, and towards formal provision in particular. Thus, better information on childcare services, childcare taster sessions and funds to cover the costs of a 'settle-in' period when a child starts at a new provider, could all help these parents overcome their reluctance to use non-parental care. Targeting these measures at those with older pre-school and school-age children could prove particularly effective.

For those lone parents who possessed a high work orientation and were comfortable about using non-parental childcare, the difficulties that prevented them from entering work or considerably limited their employment options tended to be rooted in issues of cost, flexibility and coordination. The inflexible approaches of

employers and/or childcare providers sometimes represented a considerable obstacle to work, as did a lack of formal pre-school and out-of-school provision, as well as the costs associated with the former. Coordinating work, childcare and education could also prove very difficult or unfeasible, unless these were in close proximity or parents had access to a car or good public transport.

A lower work orientation tended to be associated with low employability and limited earning potential, and a key issue here is how policy can be refined to create an environment that makes paid employment more attractive to lone parents who are not strongly orientated towards work. Learning and voluntary work opportunities could represent effective gateways into employment: a low or even absent financial risk made these options particularly attractive to some lone parents with a low disposition towards paid work, combined with the opportunity of increasing their earnings potential over the longer term. Learning and voluntary work opportunities could prove particularly effective at targeting this group if combined with childcare support.

6.7.3 What policy has achieved and what remains to be done

Since the late 1990s, childcare and employment policies have changed a great a deal. In considering what they have achieved so far and what else remains to be done, it might be useful to compare our conclusions with those from another study on lone parents, that addressed very similar issues, but which was conducted in the very different policy climate of the mid 1990s (Ford, 1996). Like our study, Ford explored in considerable depth the influences that underpin lone parents' decisions about work and childcare and one of his conclusions was that:

> *'Even in the presence of severe hardship, and regardless of incentives to improve income offered by paid work, it must be accepted that at least some lone parents will not be motivated or able to work for at least some of the time they spend as lone parents.'*

(Ford, 1996:xvi)

Our exploration of parents' beliefs and attitudes concerning work, parenting and childcare points to a similar conclusion in relation to the limits within which policy can attempt to affect the various legitimate life choices parents make. However, our study has also shown how policy intervention has, in some cases, succeeded in making it possible for parents to (re-)enter work, or to consider doing so. Our study has also shown how policy responses might need to be refined and tailored to meet the needs of parents with different combinations of work and parental care orientation.

A key issue highlighted by Ford was the considerable difficulty lone parents faced in identifying suitable childcare and suitable employment, and the 'chicken or egg' dilemma surrounding the need to secure both simultaneously. He also showed how uncertainty and a lack of understanding about the financial implications of taking up paid employment could be a considerable barrier to work. These are all issues also

highlighted by our research, but our results also show that when the support provided by the NDLP programme works well, it can help to remove these barriers.

Ford highlighted a lack of affordable childcare as another key barrier to work. While, again, our study supported this finding, it has also shown that increases both in childcare provision and in the financial support available to pay for it have played an important part in enabling some lone parents to take up paid employment. It is clear, however, that more still needs to be done in this area to increase the availability of different types of (affordable) provision.

Some of the lone parents we spoke to expressed a need or desire to test out childcare arrangements before taking up work. This, again, was identified by Ford and, again, policy in this area appears to be moving in the right direction. The Childcare Tasters, currently being piloted, would be likely to meet the needs of these parents. Extending the childcare element of the WTC to cover a period before a parent starts working could also prove an effective solution.

There are two policy areas, however, where little seems to have changed since Ford carried out his study: namely, the difficulties lone parents can face if they work atypical hours, and the lack of financial rewards for informal carers.

The issue of atypical working hours has implications for both employment and childcare policies. While legislation was recently introduced to encourage employers to offer working arrangements that better suit the needs of parents, as we have mentioned, some tightening-up might be needed to make this truly effective, particularly in relation to working atypical hours. In terms of childcare policy, while there have been some attempts to provide services at atypical hours (e.g. home-based care schemes), progress in this area has been very limited, reflecting both the difficulties associated with the provision of this kind of service, but also some uncertainty about parents' needs and willingness to use formal provision at these times (La Valle *et al.*, 2002; Statham and Mooney, 2003). It would appear that more research is needed in this area to explore the 'acceptability' to parents of formal provision at different atypical times and, hence, what might represent suitable alternatives for childcare at such times. When this has been established, the issue of whether it will be feasible to provide these types of service without substantial and ongoing government funding will also need to be addressed.

As yet, only the Childcare Vouchers scheme has offered parents any financial help to pay for informal childcare provision. However, from April 2005, it will no longer be possible to use Childcare Vouchers to pay (non-registered) family and friends for childcare. As discussed earlier, views on whether informal carers should be paid varied among the lone parents we spoke to, reflecting the picture that had emerged from previous research in the area (Arthur *et al.,* 2003). The desirability of such payments may also depend on who the informal carer is (e.g. grandparents or other family and friends) and the nature of the lone parent's relationship with them; again, further research would be needed to understand all the various dimensions of this issue, as well as the likely impact and effectiveness of providing some kind of financial support for informal care.

Appendix
Topic guides for depth interviews and group discussions

Topic guide –
Study of parents and childcare
non-workers

Research aims
- To investigate lone parents' preferences in relation to childcare, including views about non-parental care and both preferences for and use of formal and informal care (or different combinations of the two).

- How lone parents' decisions about childcare (and perceived choices and constraints) interact with their decisions about employment, particularly at crucial points of transition, primarily having children and becoming a lone parent.

- Factors affecting some lone parents' decision not to work, including barriers and constraints on childcare use and attitudes towards non-parental childcare, and factors that might encourage non-working lone parents to (re-) enter the labour market

- Perceived positive and negative aspects combining work and parenthood

Interviewer's introduction
Remind about SPRU and NatCen being independent organisations.

Remind that research funded by the Department for Work and Pensions, to provide information about the experiences and views of parents and childcare.

Explain the issues to be covered:

- *About your family;*

- *Employment (past and present);*

- *Childcare arrangements;*

- *Views and attitudes about childcare & work.*

Interview will last around one and a half hours and will be in the form of a discussion to obtain your views – need for breaks?

Explain confidentiality, and how the material will be used.

Explain discussion will have no effect on any benefits, or any dealings with Inland Revenue, Jobcentre Plus, DWP (formerly the Benefits Agency and Employment Service (and before that DSS, DHSS), Child Support Agency, Social Security Office, etc.

Any questions or concerns?

Check informed consent again.

Ask for permission to use tape-recorder.

Give incentive payment.

Topics

Background.

Employment history.

Current circumstances.

Current childcare arrangements.

Past use of childcare.

Paying for childcare.

Childcare awareness and preferences.

Coordination of childcare arrangements.

Views and attitudes about childcare and work.

1. Background

I would like to begin by asking some information about your family.

Check:

Number, names and ages of children in household.

Does anyone else live in the household?

Relationship to lone parent and children

How long have you lived in this neighbourhood?

Do you have any family/close friends living nearby?

Length of time as a lone parent – check whether in a couple when (first) child was born.

2. Employment history

Q: *First of all, could you tell me at what age you left full-time education and what you were hoping to do at the time?*

- Age left;
- Qualifications left with;
- Aspirations and plans?

Q: *Now I would like you to tell me briefly about any work you have done since you left full-time education. It would also be helpful if you could tell me about any times when you were not working, as well as any periods when you were moving in and out of work on a regular basis.*

- Probe fully for factors affecting job changes or periods of non-employment, including attitudes and 'push and pull' factors, e.g. local employment market, implications of type of work etc;
- Probe for level of career-motivation/ambition/perceptions of importance and significance of work;
- Probe for main activities other than work (study, voluntary activities, hobbies, interests).

Q: *How do you think having your (first) child affected your decisions about working?*

- Probe fully – including whether views changed over time – i.e. attitude whilst pregnant, during child first year etc.

If was in a couple when (first) child was born:

Q: *And how do you think becoming a lone parent affected your decisions about working?*

- Probe fully for reasons.

Q: *And do you think your decisions about working have been affected as your children have got older?*

- Probe fully including for reasons why children reaching different ages/ milestones affected the decision.

For those who were once in paid employment while a parent:

Q: *Thinking back to when you were last working, how did you find it combining work with looking after (child/children)?*

- Probe fully, try to identify any difficulties.

For those who have been in paid employment:

Q: *And when you stopped working (x months ago), how did you come to that decision?*

- Prompt for when they came to the decision;
- Prompt for the how long it took to come to a decision;
- Probe fully. Possible factors include:
  - Didn't want to work / didn't like job;
  - Only working temporarily;
  - Wanted to stay at home with children;
  - Couldn't find a way to combine work and childcare;
  - Employer not family-friendly;
  - Change in partner's working circumstances (if in a couple then);
  - Probe for what issue clinched the decision?

For those who have been in paid employment:

Q: *And do you think there was one main influence on your decision to stop working? What was this?*

3. Current circumstances

Q: You mentioned that you are not working at the moment. What would you say are the reasons why you are not working?

- Probe fully. Possible factors include:
  - Not interested in working;
  - Want to be at home to look after child(ren);
  - Can't find suitable/affordable childcare;
  - Can't afford to work/not worth it for low wages;
  - Can't get the sort of job I want;
  - Not enough jobs in the area (of the sort I want);
  - Ill health/disability;
  - Caring for other family member;
- Probe for relative importance.

4. Current childcare arrangements

Q: We have talked about your work history; I would now like to ask you about who looks after the children. First, can I just check, (is/are) (child/children) currently at school?

- If yes, prompt for whether full or part-time.

Q: Does your child (children) have special medical or educational needs, including a disability?

- Probe fully for nature of special need/disability.

Q: Thinking about a typical week, can you tell me whether there is anyone else, apart from (the school and) yourself, who regularly looks after (child/children)? (Please include arrangements at all times, including evenings and weekends, and school based childcare provided out-of-school hours).

- Probe fully for formal and informal providers i.e.:
  - Nursery school or class;
  - Day nursery / crèche / kindergarten;
  - Playgroup;
  - Childminder;
  - Out-of-school club;
  - Nanny/au pair;

– Partner (not child's biological parent);

– Grandparent(s);

– Siblings or self-care;

– Other relatives or friends;

- Prompt for level of involvement from child's other parent– including whether shift parenting relationship.

The next few questions are only for parents using non-parental childcare other than school (but including school - based childcare provided out-of-school hours).

Q: *On which days of the week and times of the day would you usually use each of these providers/people?*

- Probe fully for all providers mentioned;

- Probe for different days (including weekends) and start and finish times, get an idea of which providers used the most;

- Probe for factors affecting why they use providers and use at different times, e.g. opening hours, beliefs about when children should be with parents;

- Probe for level of consistency week-to-week.

Q: *So far we have been talking about the childcare you use in a typical week. Do your arrangements differ in the school holidays (including half-terms)?*

- Probe fully for differences in types, days, times and hours.

Q: *Do your childcare arrangements also differ at other times? How consistent would you say they were week-to-week?*

- Probe for factors causing change, e.g. child or parents' sickness, parents' study, inconsistent availability of childcare providers;

- What are their emergency arrangements if child is sick or childcare provider lets them down?

Q: *You've described to me the kind(s) of childcare you currently use. Can you tell me something about why you decided to use (this/these) kind(s) of childcare?*

- Probe fully particularly for different reasons for using formal and informal providers . Possible reasons for using different forms of childcare are:

– Trust provider / peace of mind;

– Easier to arrange / fits with work;

– Cost;

    – Convenience;

    – Difficulty/ ease of negotiating/paying for informal childcare;

    – Previous experience of this childcare;

    – Good reputation or recommendation;

    – Meet child's developmental/social needs;

    – No other kinds available in locality;

    – Replicate child being at home with parent;

    – Moral /religious /cultural reasons (notions of who uses what care);

    – Important for child to spend time with other relatives/ non-resident parent;

    – Suitable for children with special needs/disability;

    – Own experiences of childcare as a child.

Q: *And, of the different factors you have mentioned, would you say some were more important than others in making your decision? Which would you say was most important?*

    • Probe fully, including reasons for/depths of these views

Q: *And when you were deciding which kind of childcare to use, did you feel there was anything that limited your choice?*

    • Probe fully for limiting factors, options preferred/considered and reasons for this. Limiting factors might include:

       – Cost;

       – Negotiating/paying for informal childcare;

       – Location/transport;

       – Availability/opening days and times;

       – Poor quality/bad reputation;

       – Lack of provision in local area/providers full;

       – Lack of special needs provision.

Q: *And how happy would you say you are with the different childcare providers you are using and with the overall arrangements? What seems to work well and less well ?*

    • Probe fully.

If not using any non-parental childcare:

Q: *Why did you decide to look after (child/children) yourself rather than use another childcare provider?*

- Probe fully. Possible reasons include:
  - Think parent's responsibility to look after children;
  - Lack of suitable childcare in the area (including for children with special needs);
  - Couldn't afford childcare;
  - Child did not want to be left with others;
  - Own experience of childcare as a child.

Q: *And would you say there was one **main** reason why you decided to look after your child (children) yourself?*

- Probe fully for preference and relative importance of issues.

Q: *Do you think anything might encourage you to use childcare?*

- Probe fully. Possible factors might include:
  - Cheaper childcare, better financial support;
  - Better or more provision in local area;
  - Different types of provision in local area (including special needs);
  - If child wanted to be looked after by others;
  - Employment opportunities.

5. Past use of childcare

Q: (*We have talked about the childcare you are using at the moment). Have you used any (other) childcare in the past?*

- Probe fully for formal and informal providers i.e.:
  - Nursery school or class;
  - Day nursery / crèche / kindergarten;
  - Playgroup;
  - Childminder;
  - Out-of-school club;
  - Nanny/au pair;
  - Child's other parent;
  - Partner (not child's biological parent);

  – Grandparent(s);

  – Siblings or self-care;

  – Other relatives or friends;

  • Prompt for level of involvement from child's other parent in the past - including shift parenting.

If used other kinds of childcare in the past:

Q: *What was your experience of (this/these) other kind(s) of childcare? What worked well and less well for you and your child(ren)?*

  • Probe for reasons for using different providers and reasons for changes particularly from informal to formal provision and vice versa.

Q: *Has your experience of using childcare in the past affected your current childcare?*

  • Probe fully for how it has affected current usage.

If was in a couple when (first) child born:

Q: *And do you think that becoming a lone parent affected the kinds of childcare you have used since then?*

  • Probe fully, explore role of ex-partner (including impact of shift parenting) and their family if appropriate.

6.   Paying for childcare

This section only asked if currently using childcare

Q: *Do you pay for any of the childcare you use?*

  • Name the type of childcare paid for;

  • Prompt for approximate costs of each provider and total weekly costs;

  • Prompt for payment in kind;

  • Prompt for how costs might vary (e.g. between term-time and school holidays).

Q: *How do you pay for this?*

  • Prompt for financial support e.g. childcare tax credit; payment in kind; help from family/ other parent. Explain childcare element of WTC if necessary;

  • Prompt for concessions from childcare provider.

Q: *Has the cost of different types of childcare and the financial help you can you can get to pay for these affected your (current/past) childcare arrangements?*

- Probe fully;

- If receiving WTC, probe for how timing of receiving WTC influenced arrangements for using childcare;

- Prompt for whether financial support has been required long-term or short-term;

- Prompt for how cost/financial help might have determined choice of formal/informal provider.

7. Coordination of childcare arrangements

Only ask if using childcare

Q: *You have already told me about your work and childcare arrangements during a typical week. Now I would like to focus on the way that you coordinate your transport between (school,) and childcare.*

In a typical day, can you take me through your normal for transporting (child/children) to and from the home to school and childcare?

- Count all those who help pick up and drop off children each day;

- Check if these people are additional to those providing childcare;

- Types of transport relied on to transport the children;

- Differences on different days of the week.

Q: *How much approximately do you spend on travel for (you and) (child/children) in a typical week?*

Q: *Is there a point in the day when (child/children) have to be transported from one childcare provider to another (including, if relevant, school)? If so, how does this work?*

- When and where does this happen;

- Who responsible e.g. self, other parent, staff at one of the provider, 'walkers' in after-school clubs, special arrangements using childminders/friends/family;

- Whether pays for this;

- Difficulties with these arrangements.

Q: *What would you say is the most difficult thing about your arrangements for getting your child(ren) to and from (school and) childcare?*

- How feel about it?

- How stressful is it?

Q: *What aspects of your arrangements work well?*

• Probe fully.

Q: *In a typical week, what would you say is the key thing you rely on most and could not do without in relation to transporting (child/children)?*

• Does this influence thinking about work? Would they be able to work if transport arrangements were better?

• Would they have to change childcare arrangements without it?

Q: *How do you think you could manage travel arrangements if you were to go to work?*

Q: *And are travel arrangements a consideration in your feelings about working at the moment?*

• Probe fully – relative importance of this factor (might better transport arrangements encourage them to work?), what aspects particularly important;

• Probe for whether they foresee travel-related problems if they were to go to work.

Q: *How do you think you would manage travel arrangements if you were to go to work – would you foresee any problems?*

• Probe fully.

Q: *Is there anything that might make it easier for you to manage (child/children's) travel if you were to go back to work?*

• Probe for reasons, e.g. a car; better parking; more reliable – frequent public transport; shorter/less frequent journeys (childcare – school closer together).

8.   Childcare awareness and preferences

Only ask if currently using childcare

Q: *How did you go about finding the childcare you are using at the moment?*

• If appropriate, prompt for involvement of other parent or discussion/ consultation with other relatives or friends;

• Prompt for sources of information, advice and guidance, e.g. local authority/ children's information services New Deal/ Sure start if come up; also informal recommendations/word of mouth; family/friends offered childcare; previous history/experience of using it;

• Prompt for whether the child's opinion was a factor;

• Probe for which sources of information and advice had greatest influence.

Only ask if no childcare now but used it in the past

Q: How did you go about finding the childcare you have used in the past?

- If appropriate, prompt for involvement of other parent or discussion/ consultation with other relatives or friends;

- Prompt for sources of information, advice and guidance, e.g. local authority/ children's information services New Deal/ Sure start if come up; also informal recommendations/word of mouth; family/friends offered childcare; previous history/experience of using it;

- Prompt for whether the child's opinion was a factor;

- Prompt for which sources of information and advice had greatest influence.

Ask all

Q: (Apart from what we have already discussed), what do you know about the different childcare services available in your area?

- Probe for perceptions of shortages in types of care, degree of choice, cost, quality;

- Probe for availability for different age groups/types of families (e.g. working parents);

- Probe for how child would feel about using different services;

- Probe for what is perceived as the norm in the area;

- Probe for whether availability of childcare influenced the decision not to work.

If mentions childcare in the area that not currently using/used in the past

Q: Have you ever thought about using any of the childcare you have just mentioned?

- Probe for reasons for not using childcare available – cost, availability, location, quality, child's preference/needs.

Ask all

Q: In an ideal world, what type of childcare would you use?

- Probe for perceived advantages of this kind of childcare over other kinds (particularly formal versus informal);

- Probe for preference not to use non-parental childcare and factors affecting this attitude.

Q: *Some people would not think about using certain forms of childcare. What about you, is there any form of childcare that you would definitely avoid using?*

- Probe for factors affecting negative views and ways in which these might be changed.

Explore perceptions of parent role/factors affecting overall views of non-parental childcare.

9. Views and attitudes about childcare and work

Q: *In your opinion, can there be positive things about combining motherhood/ fatherhood and work?*

- Probe fully. Possible positive aspects:
  - Gives parent personal fulfilment/good for self-esteem;
  - Good to have a career, achievement;
  - Higher income;
  - Good for children, social interaction, 'healthy'.

Q: *And do you think there are any negative aspects?*

- Probe fully. Possible negative aspects include:
  - Stressful, difficult to manage 'double burden';
  - Miss out on caring for child during day;
  - Does not bring child up how they would want to.

Q: *Have you ever considered starting working in the near future and if so what might make that likely or possible?*

- Prompt for financial support, childcare-related factors, availability of suitable jobs, potential changes in circumstances (e.g. if a partner were present).

Q: *And do you think there is one thing in particular that might help you to start working?*

Q: *Would you say that working might have an affect on your role as a mother/ father?*

- Probe for perception of role mothers/fathers ought to play, what's considered 'culturally acceptable';
- Probe for how their expectations of combining parenthood and work has compared to their experience.

Q: Do you think you would, in principle, be happy to combine motherhood/ fatherhood and work (either now or in the future)?

- Probe fully (if in the future, when?).

Q: And in the near future – do you think your current childcare arrangements will change in any way?

- Probe for potential changes and factors affecting these;

- Probe for concerns about the future.

Q: Finally, the Government really wants to understand what parents think about childcare, particularly parents who bring up children on their own. If you had some key messages that you would want to send back to the Government about childcare, what would they be?

10. Check

Q: Before I go, it is important for us to get a spread of people in our study, so can I just check the following:

Your age?

Ethnicity?

Household tenure?

Q: And do you also have income from credits or benefits, e.g. Income Support, Child Support, Disability Benefit, Housing Benefit, Tax Credits such as Working Tax Credit?

If receives benefits/credits

Q: And roughly how much do you receive in benefits/credits?

- Prompt for time period (week/month/year).

If receives benefits/credits

Q: And when did you start receiving these benefits/credits?

Q: Finally, is there anything else you would like to add?

Topic guide –
Study of parents and childcare new entrants to work

Research aims

• To investigate lone parents' preferences in relation to childcare, including views about non-parental care and both preferences for and use of formal and informal care (or different combinations of the two).

• How lone parents' decisions about childcare (and perceived choices and constraints) interact with their decisions about employment, particularly at crucial points of transition, primarily having children and becoming a lone parent.

• How lone parents manage or negotiate childcare within working life.

Interviewer's introduction.

Remind about SPRU and NatCen being independent organisations.

Remind that research funded by the Department for Work and Pensions, to provide information about the experiences and views of parents and childcare

Explain the issues to be covered:

•   *About your family;*

•   *Employment (past and present);*

•   *Childcare arrangements;*

•   *Views and attitudes about childcare & work.*

Interview will last around one and a half hours and will be in the form of a discussion to obtain your views – need for breaks?

Explain confidentiality, and how the material will be used.

Explain discussion will have no effect on any benefits, or any dealings with Inland Revenue, Jobcentre Plus, DWP (formerly the Benefits Agency and Employment Service (and before that DSS, DHSS), Child Support Agency, Social Security Office, etc.

Any questions or concerns?

Check informed consent again.

Ask for permission to use tape-recorder.

Give incentive payment.

Topics

Background.

Employment history and entry into paid work.

Current job.

Current childcare arrangements.

Past use of childcare.

Paying for childcare.

Childcare awareness and preferences.

Coordination of (school,) childcare and work.

Views and attitudes about childcare and work.

1. Background

I would like to begin by asking some information about your family.

Check:

Number, names and ages of children in household.

Does anyone else live in the household?

Relationship to lone parent and children.

How long have you lived in this neighbourhood?

Do you have any family/close friends living nearby?

Length of time as a lone parent – check whether in a couple when (first) child was born.

2. Employment history and entry into paid work

Q: *We are now going to talk about your work. Could you start by telling me at what age you left full-time education and what you were hoping to do at the time?*

- Age left;
- Qualifications left with;
- Aspirations and plans?

Q: Now I would like you to tell me briefly about any work you have done since you left full-time education. It would also be helpful if you could tell me about any times when you were not working, as well as any periods when you were moving in and out of work on a regular basis.

- Probe fully for factors affecting job changes or periods of non-employment, including attitudes and 'push and pull' factors, e.g. local employment market, implications of type of work etc;

- Probe for level of career-motivation/ambition/perceptions of importance and significance of work;

- Probe for main activities other than work (study, voluntary activities, hobbies, interests).

Q: How do you think having your (first) child affected your decisions about working?

- Probe fully – including whether views changed over time – i.e. attitude whilst pregnant, during child first year etc.

If was in a couple when (first) child was born:

Q: And how do you think becoming a lone parent affected your decisions about working?

- Probe fully for reasons.

Q: And do you think your decisions about working have been affected as your children have got older?

- Probe fully including for reasons why children reaching different ages/ milestones affected the decision.

Q: And thinking now about the point at which you entered paid work (x months ago), can you describe for me how you came to that decision?

- Probe for most important factors – what 'clinched' it?

- Prompt for whether had particular concerns, e.g. what might happen in an emergency, feelings of guilt, worried about co-ordinating childcare and work;

- Probe for how they managed to reconcile conflicting concerns (if they did managed to) in order to enable them to enter work;

- Probe for whether availability of childcare influenced the decision to work;

- Probe for sequence of decisions – did job or childcare come first?

Some possible reasons for entry into current paid work:

1. **Child-centred reasons:**

   Child(ren) right age (all now at school, youngest started EYE);

   Child(ren) bored at home;

   Child(ren) ready for new experience;

   Felt child(ren) could benefit from care.

2. **Parent-centred reasons:**

   Right time for parents;

   Need for interaction with other adults;

   Shift in views on mother/father roles;

   Self-esteem issues;

   Friends went back to work;

   Encouragement from others to work.

3. **Childcare/other reasons**:

   Childcare availability/cost;

   Financial/economic reasons;

   Job availability/job search.

3.   Current job

Q: Now could you tell me a bit more about your current job?

- Prompt for type of job and type/size of organisation;

- Prompt for number of hours and timing of working day, including atypical hours, shift and weekend work – and explore how regular work pattern is;

- Prompt for location and journey to work, transport used;

- Prompt for perceptions of local labour market, reasons for having this particular job.

Q: Roughly how much do you earn from this job?

- Prompt for time period (week/month/year).

Q: And do you also have income from other sources, e.g. Income Support, Child Support, Disability Benefit, Housing Benefit, Tax Credits such as Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit?

If receives benefits/credits

Q: And roughly how much do you receive in benefits/credits?

- Prompt for time period (week/month/year).

If receives benefits/credits IF RECEIVES BENEFITS/CREDITS

Q: And when did you start receiving these benefits/credits?

Q: And how does your current job suit you and your family?

- Probe fully for factors affecting this relationship (**NB needs adapting if self-employed**);

- Probe for how job fits with childcare – hours, location etc;

- Probe for job satisfaction and enjoyment, affects on parent's self-esteem, state of mind, social aspects;

- Probe for any difficulties coping with job/managing work and family together, including employer/colleague attitudes/support;

- Probe for financial benefits of working; balance with childcare costs;

- Probe for career motivators, ambition;

- Prompt for family-friendly practices, e.g:

  - flexi-time (how exactly does this work?);

  - part-time working (number of days/hours);

  - term-time working;

  - homeworking (solely or partly?);

  - childcare facilities at work;

  - relationship with employer/employer's approach/attitude to family responsibilities / work-life balance;

  - employer understanding in emergencies (e.g. child's sickness).

Q: And, in addition to your main job, can I ask whether you are doing any other work – either paid or unpaid – or whether you are taking a course or doing any study at the moment?

4.   Current childcare arrangements

Q: We have talked about your work; I would now like to ask you about who looks after the children. First, can I just check, (is/are) (child/children) currently at school?

   • If yes, prompt for whether full or part-time.

Q: Does your child (children) have special medical or educational needs, including a disability?

   • Probe fully for nature of special need/disability.

Q: Thinking about a typical week, can you tell me whether there is anyone else, apart from (the school and) yourself, who regularly looks after (child/ children)?(Please include arrangements at all times, including evenings and weekends and school based childcare provided out-of-school hours).

   • Probe fully for formal and informal providers i.e.:

      – Nursery school or class;

      – Day nursery/crèche/kindergarten;

      – Playgroup;

      – Childminder;

      – Out-of-school club;

      – Nanny/au pair;

      – Partner (not child's biological parent);

      – Grandparent(s);

      – Siblings or self-care;

      – Other relatives e.g. sisters or friends;

   • Prompt for level of involvement from child's other parent – including whether shift parenting relationship.

The next few questions are only for parents using non parental childcare other than school (but including school based childcare provided out-of-school hours).

Q: On which days of the week and times of the day would you usually use each of these providers/people?

   • Probe fully for all providers mentioned;

   • Probe for different days (including weekends) and start and finish times, get an idea of which providers used the most;

- Probe for factors affecting use at different times, e.g. opening hours, working arrangements, beliefs about when children should be with parents;

- Probe for level of consistency week-to-week.

Q: And do these providers/people only look after (child/children) when you are at work or also when you are not at work?

- Probe fully for all providers mentioned.

Q: So far we have been talking about the childcare you use in a typical week. Do your arrangements differ in the school holidays (including half-terms)?

- Probe fully for differences in types, days, times and hours.

Q: Do your childcare arrangements also differ at other times? How consistent would you say they were week-to-week?

- Probe for factors causing change, e.g. child or parents' sickness, parents' study, inconsistent availability of childcare providers, changes in parent's employment circumstances and working patterns;

- What are their emergency arrangements if child is sick or childcare provider lets them down?

Q: You've described to me the kind(s) of childcare you currently use. Can you tell me something about why you decided to use (this/these) kind(s) of childcare?

- Probe fully particularly for different reasons for using formal and informal provision. Possible reasons for using different forms of childcare are:

  – Trust provider/peace of mind;

  – Easier to arrange/fits with work;

  – Cost;

  – Convenience;

  – Difficulty/ ease of negotiating/paying for informal childcare;

  – Previous experience of this childcare;

  – Good reputation or recommendation;

  – Meet child's developmental/social needs;

  – No other kinds available in locality;

  – Replicate child being at home with parent;

  – Moral /religious /cultural reasons (notions of who uses what care);

  – Important for child to spend time with non-residents parent/other relatives;

  – Suitable for children with special needs/disability;

  – Own experiences of childcare when a child.

Q: *And, of the different factors you have mentioned, would you say some were more important than others in making your decision? Which would you say was most important?*

- Probe fully, including the reasons for/ depths of these views.

Q: *And when you were deciding which kind of childcare to use, did you feel there was anything that limited your choice?*

- Probe fully for limiting factors, options preferred/considered and reasons for this. Limiting factors might include:
  - Cost;
  - Negotiating/paying for informal childcare;
  - Location/transport;
  - Availability/opening days and times;
  - Poor quality/bad reputation;
  - Lack of provision in local area/providers full (waiting lists);
  - Lack of special needs provision.

Q: *Did you have any other worries related to childcare before you started working?*

- Probe fully – e.g. leaving the child, felt guilty, worried about how timings/ journeys would work, negotiating/paying for informal childcare.

Q: *And since you started working how happy would you say you have been with the different childcare providers you are using, and with the overall arrangements? What seems to work well and less well ?*

- Probe fully.

If not using any non-parental childcare

Q: *Why did you decide to look after (child/children) yourself rather than using another childcare provider?*

- Probe fully. Possible reasons include:
  - Think parent's responsibility to look after children;
  - Lack of suitable childcare in the area;
  - Couldn't afford childcare;
  - Child did not want to be left with others;
  - Own experiences of childcare when a child.
- Probe for childcare as being used an 'excuse' for not working.

Q: *And would you say there was one **main** reason why you decided to look after your child (children) yourself?*

- Probe fully for preference and relative importance of issues.

Q: *Do you think anything might encourage you to use childcare?*

- Probe fully. Possible factors might include:
  - Cheaper childcare, better financial support;
  - Better or more provision in local area;
  - Different types of provision in local area;
  - If child wanted to;
  - Employment opportunities.

5. Past use of childcare

Q: (*We have talked about the childcare you are using at the moment). Have you used any (other) childcare in the past?*

- Probe fully for formal and informal providers i.e.:
  - Nursery school or class;
  - Day nursery/crèche/kindergarten;
  - Playgroup;
  - Childminder;
  - Out-of-school club;
  - Nanny/au pair;
  - Child's other parent;
  - Partner (not child's biological parent);
  - Grandparent(s);
  - Siblings or self-care;
  - Other relatives or friends;
- Prompt for level of involvement from child's other parent in the past – including shift parenting.

If used other kinds of childcare in the past

Q: What was your experience of (this/these) other kind(s) of childcare? What worked well and less well for you and your child(ren)?

- Probe for pros/cons of different types of childcare;

- Probe for reasons for using different providers and reasons for changes particularly from informal to formal provision and vice versa.

Q: Has your experience of using childcare in the past affected your current childcare?

- Probe fully for how it has affected current usage.

If was in a couple when (first) child born:

Q: And do you think that becoming a lone parent affected the kinds of childcare you have used since then?

- Probe fully, explore role of ex-partner (including impact of shift parenting) and their family if appropriate.

6. Paying for childcare

This section only asked if currently using childcare.

Q: Do you pay for any of the childcare you use?

- Name the type of childcare paid for;

- Prompt for approximate costs of each provider and total weekly costs;

- Prompt for payment in kind;

- Prompt for how costs might vary (e.g. between term-time and school holidays).

Q: How do you pay for this?

- Prompt for financial support e.g. Childcare tax credit; payment in kind; help from family/other parent, employer. Explain childcare element of WTC if necessary;

- Prompt for concessions from childcare provider.

Q: *Has the cost of different types of childcare and the financial help you can get to pay for these affected your (current/past) childcare arrangements?*

- Probe fully;

- If receiving WTC, probe for how timing of receiving WTC influenced arrangements for using childcare:
  - Prompt for what has happened during any gaps in financial support e.g. between finding childcare and starting work;
  - Prompt for whether financial support has been required long-term or short-term;
  - Prompt for how cost/financial help might have determined choice of formal/informal provider.

7. Coordination of (school,) childcare and work

Q: *You have already told me about your work and childcare arrangements during a typical week. Now I would like to focus on the way that you coordinate your transport between work and childcare/ school.*

In a typical working day, can you take me through your normal routine for transporting (child/children) to and from the home to (school and) childcare, and how this fits in with your own journeys to and from work?

- Count all those who help pick up and drop off (child/children) each day;

- Check if these people are additional to those providing childcare;

- Types of transport relied on to transport (child/children);

- Differences on different days of the week.

Q: *How much approximately do you spend on travel for you and (child/children) in a typical working week?*

Q: *Is there a point in the day when (child/children) (has/have) to be transported from one childcare provider to another (including, if relevant, school)? If so, how does this work?*

- When and where does this happen;

- Who responsible e.g. self, other parent, staff at one of the providers, 'walkers' in after-school clubs, special arrangements using childminders/ friends/family;

- Whether pays for this;

- Difficulties with these arrangements.

Q: *What would you say is the most difficult thing about your arrangements for getting yourself to and from work and your child(ren) to and from (school and) childcare?*

- How feel about it?

- How stressful is it?

Q: *What aspect of these arrangements works well?*

- Probe fully.

Q: *In a typical working week, what would you say is the key thing you rely on most and could not do without in relation to transporting yourself and (child/ children)?*

- Would they have to give up work without it?

- Would they have to change childcare arrangements without it?

Q: *And thinking back again to the time when you decided to start work, were travel arrangements a consideration at that point?*

- Probe fully – relative importance of this factor (could it have stopped them going to work?), what aspects particularly important.

Q: *Is there anything that might make it easier for you to go to work and manage (child/children's) travel as well?*

- Probe for reasons, e.g. a car; better parking; more reliable – frequent public transport; shorter/less frequent journeys (childcare-school closer together); work closer to home/school.

8.   Childcare awareness and preferences

Only ask if currently using childcare

Q: *How did you go about finding the childcare you are using at the moment?*

- If appropriate, prompt for involvement of other parent or discussion/ consultation with other relatives or friends;

- Prompt for sources of information, advice and guidance, e.g. local authority/ children's information services New Deal/Sure start if come up; also informal recommendations/word of mouth; family/friends offered childcare; previous history/experience of using it;

- Prompt for whether the child's opinion was a factor;

- Probe for which sources of information and advice had greatest influence.

Only ask if no childcare now but used it in the past

Q: How did you go about finding the childcare you have used in the past?

- If appropriate, prompt for involvement of other parent or discussion/ consultation with other relatives or friends;

- Prompt for sources of information, advice and guidance, e.g. local authority/ children's information services New Deal/Sure start if come up; also informal recommendations/word of mouth; family/friends offered childcare; previous history/experience of using it;

- Prompt for whether the child's opinion was a factor;

- Prompt for which sources of information and advice had greatest influence.

Ask all

Q: (Apart from what we have already discussed), what do you know about the different childcare services available in your area?

- Probe for perceptions of shortages in types of care, degree of choice, cost, quality;

- Probe for availability for different age groups/types of families (e.g. working parents);

- Probe for how child would feel about using different services;

- Probe for what is perceived as the norm in the area;

- Probe for whether availability of childcare influenced the decision to work.

If mentions childcare in the area that not currently using/used in the past

Q: Have you ever thought about using any of the childcare you have just mentioned?

- *Probe for reasons for not using childcare available – cost, availability,* location, quality, child's preference/needs

Ask all

Q: In an ideal world, what type of childcare would you use?

- Probe for perceived advantages of this kind of childcare over other kinds (particularly formal versus informal);

- Probe for preference not to use non-parental childcare and factors affecting this attitude;

- If ideal choice is different from actual childcare used, probe for reasons why this childcare is not actually used.

Q: *Some people would not think about using certain forms of childcare. What about you, is there any form of childcare that you would definitely avoid using?*

- Probe for factors affecting negative views and ways in which these might be changed;

- Explore perceptions of parent role / factors affecting overall views of non-parental childcare;

- If using childcare they would want to avoid, probe for reasons why they have to use it.

9. Views and attitudes about childcare and work

Q: *What would you say is positive about combining motherhood/fatherhood and work?*

- Probe fully. Possible positive aspects:
  - Gives parent personal fulfilment/good for self-esteem;
  - Good to have a career, achievement;
  - Higher income;
  - Good for children, social interaction, 'healthy'.

Q: *And do you think there are any negative aspects?*

- Probe fully. Possible negative aspects include:
  - Stressful, difficult to manage 'double burden';
  - Miss out on caring for child during day;
  - Does not bring child up how they would want to.

Q: *Would you say that working has an effect on your role as a mother/father?*

- Probe for perception of role mothers/fathers ought to play, what's considered 'culturally acceptable';

- Probe for how their expectations of combining parenthood and work has compared to their experience.

Q: *Generally, would you say you are happy about combining motherhood/fatherhood and work?*

- Probe fully.

Q: *In the near future – do you think your current childcare arrangements will change in any way?*

- Probe for potential changes and factors affecting these;

- Probe for concerns about the future.

Q: *In the near future- do you think your work arrangements will change in any way?*

- Probe for potential changes (including stopping work, changes in hours) and factors affecting these.

Q: *Finally, the Government really wants to understand what parents think about childcare, particularly parents who bring up children on their own. If you had any key messages that you would want to send back to the Government about childcare, what would they be?*

10. Check

Q: *Before I go, it is important for us to get a spread of people in our study, so can I just check the following:*

Your age?

Ethnicity?

Household tenure?

Q: *Finally, is there anything else you would like to add?*

Topic guide –
Lone parents, childcare and work focus groups

Research aims
- To investigate lone parents' preferences in relation to childcare, including views about non-parental care and both preferences for and use of formal and informal care (or different combinations of the two).

- How lone parents' decisions about childcare (and perceived choices and constraints) interact with their decisions about employment, particularly at crucial points of transition, primarily having children and becoming a lone parent.

- How lone parents manage or negotiate childcare within working life.

- Perceived positive and negative aspects combining work and parenthood.

1. Introduction
- Introduce self and NatCen/SPRU.

- Nature and purpose of study (explain focus on lone parents) – funded by DWP.

- Incentive (a gift that won't affect any benefits or credits).

- Stress confidentiality, appeal for mutual confidentiality.

- Introduce tape recorder.

- Ground rules:
  - No right or wrong answers;
  - Want to hear from everybody;
  - Feel free to disagree;
  - Respect for views of others;
  - Any questions?

2. Background
Go round the group and ask to say a bit about themselves:
- Who live with:
  - Number and age(s) of children;
  - Whether children at school, nursery etc;
- Employment situation:
  - Whether working full or part-time;
  - Type of work;

- Length of time working:

  – Whether started working before or after having children/becoming a lone parent.

3. Information about childcare providers

- Views about amount and quality of information and advice available to parents for choosing childcare providers:

  – What is lacking;

  – What could be done to make it easier.

- How go about choosing childcare providers:

  – Sources of information used;

  – Influence on choice of parents' and children's needs;

  – Criteria used for assessing providers e.g. quality, cost, accessibility;

  – Importance of reputation/recommendations/common knowledge.

- Experience of using information sources:

  – To what extent did the type of information received match that required;

  – What else would have been useful.

4. Reasons for using providers

Ask the group to consider a series of statements printed on cards:

- 'Most parents would choose to use family members or friends for childcare rather than a nursery, playgroup or childminder, even if it was less convenient'.

- 'Most parents would rather their child went to a nursery or an out-of-school club than to a childminder'.

- 'For most parents, the cost of childcare is a major consideration when deciding the kind of childcare they can have for their children'.

- 'Most mothers would prefer to stay at home and look after their children if it did not mean losing money'.

Explore all factors underlying agreement / disagreement with these statements.

5. Government support for childcare.

Explain the following scenario (give to respondents on handout):

> Imagine you are the Government and you have 10 million pounds to invest in improving childcare services in the UK. You have already come up with five suggestions for ways the money could be spent:
>
> • Increasing the free provision available for 3 and 4 year olds (to be provided at nursery schools, nursery classes, playgroups or day nurseries);
>
> • Creating more childcare options for older children outside school hours (e.g breakfast, after school and holiday clubs);
>
> • Increasing the Government's contribution to the cost of childcare (including the provision of free places);
>
> • Improving the information and advice available, e.g. job advice for lone parents who want to return to work, help with finding childcare;
>
> • Creating more centres where childcare is provided alongside other family services such as health services, job advice and training, counselling etc. in the same building or on the same site.
>
> It is your job now to decide how to divide the 10 million pounds between these different initiatives.
>
> You can do this however you want – you do not have to give money to all five if you do not wish to.
>
> You have 10 minutes for discussion, at the end of which you should come up with a proposal for how the money is to be split.

Split the group into two smaller groups and then reconvene to compare and discuss.

6. Conclusion

• Thinking about all the points raised in the discussion, what might make it easier for parents to manage work and childcare:

– What could employers and colleagues do;

– What could the government and Local Authorities e.g. increase childcare services, make them more accessible and responsive to parents/children's needs;

• Finally, what messages they would like to send back to the Department for Work and Pensions on any of the issues discussed.

• Any other comments.

• **Thank everyone for their time and help. Their views will go a long way to helping the DWP understand the needs of parents combining childcare and work.**

• **Stress confidentiality**

• **Give incentives**

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