

Moving Towards Inclusion

A Picture of Disadvantage in the South West

Lone Parents

March 2003



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1. A DEFINITION

It may seem unnecessary to define a 'lone' parent. For official purposes, however, a lone parent family is one where:

'A mother or father living without a spouse (and not cohabiting) with his or her never-married dependent child or children aged either under 16 or from 16 to 19 and undertaking full-time education.'

This definition therefore includes people who are married but living on their own with the children of the family, and also those who are living with others who are not their partner (with parents for example).

2. SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

Analysis undertaken by the National Council for One Parent Families (NCOPF) shows the following:

Becoming a lone parent

- It is estimated that there are 1.7 million one-parent families in Britain today – this is nearly a quarter of all families;
- The number of one-parent families has trebled in the last 30 years, but the increase has recently slowed;
- Two in five marriages will ultimately end in divorce, but recent figures show the rate is at its lowest since 1984;
- The fastest growing group of lone parents is now single or never-married lone parents (however, this includes ex-cohabitees best described as separated).

The children

- More than one in five children is now cared for in a one-parent family – this equates to approximately 3 million children;
- In 2000, 142,000 children under 16 were affected by divorce, nearly twice as many as in 1971, but fewer than the highest figure of 176,000 in 1993;
- A third to a half of children will spend some time in a one-parent family;
- Approximately 25% of children were under five years old, and seven in ten were under ten years old.

Demographics

- nine out of ten lone parents are women;
- Lone fathers are nearly three times as likely as lone mothers to be widowed and, like widows, they are likely to be older;
- The average age for a lone parent is 35;
- At any one time, less than three % of all lone parents are teenagers.

Challenging some myths

- Only 15% or one in seven lone mothers have never married or lived with their child's father;
- A one-parent family is now viewed as a 'stage' in family life that lasts on average about five and a half years;
- Never-married lone parents tend to be younger than other lone parents and are more likely to be on benefit. **However**, that group tends to have smaller families, take paid work and re-partner sooner;
- 35% of lone parents have experienced violence in their last relationship with three-quarters of them sustaining physical injuries.

Clearly, many families are now headed by a lone parent and millions of children live within such a family. However, the negative portrait of lone parenthood painted in the press and media is not necessarily accurate. Nevertheless, lone parents need specific types of support in order to ensure that they do not experience exclusion from employment and training opportunities. Support for this group is also key to the Government's pledge to cut child poverty.

3. THE IMPACT OF LONE PARENTHOOD ON SPECIFIC GROUPS

At different times, and in different sections of the media, the spotlight has fallen on particular aspects of lone parenthood, with the resultant generalisations and negative images that result in increased levels of exclusion for the groups involved.

3.1 Black and minority ethnic communities

The black and minority ethnic (BME) community has many issues relating to disadvantage and discrimination. One such issue is the seeming likelihood of black Caribbean women being left with the responsibility of bringing up a child or children alone. Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) do indeed show that some 49% of black families are headed by a lone parent, compared to only 8% of Indian families. 15% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi families are one-parent, compared to the 21% of white families and 29% described as mixed race or 'other' ethnic groups. Overall figures, however, show that 11% of lone parents are from black or ethnic minority communities.

It is not widely known though, that despite the fact that BME groups experience significantly higher levels of economic disadvantage and unemployment than white groups, figures show that black Caribbean lone parents are significantly more likely to be working and working full-time than any other group and less likely to be getting benefits. Black Caribbean women with children to support feel a cultural pressure to work in a way white women do not.

3.2 Teenage mothers

Another frequently held view is that the number of teenage pregnancies has escalated over the past decade. This is not supported by the data. Figures from the ONS show that the rate and number of teenage pregnancies fell between 1988 and 1999, from 118,900 to 98,700. For the under-16s group (rather than under – 20's) the number fell from 8,300 to 7,900. There was a slight rise in the number of pregnancies towards the end of the 1990's following well-publicised health scares relating to the contraceptive pill.

It may surprise many to know that the number of actual births to teenage mothers was highest in the late 1970's. But it must be noted that now a far greater percentage occur outside marriage (highlighting the demise of the 'shotgun' wedding) although the majority are still registered by both parents.

Although figures show that the highest rates of teenage pregnancy occur in deprived inner cities, there is also a high rate in declining coastal towns such as those in North Somerset and South Devon.

Research undertaken by the Policy Studies Institute in 1998 (*Teenage Mothers: Decisions and Outcomes*) has confirmed that the media (and sometimes Government) stereotype of the teenage lone parent getting pregnant to secure local authority housing and benefits is not supported by the available evidence. The majority of those studied have little or no knowledge of housing or benefits policy.

4. CHILD POVERTY, THE LONE PARENT, AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

4.1 Background

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant improvement in the standard of living for many families. Real incomes have risen by approximately one third and the possession of certain consumer goods such as washing machines is considered a necessity by the majority of the population. However, at the same time the proportion of children living in poverty has risen from approximately 10% to 30%. It is apparent that the benefits of a national increase in prosperity have accrued to those who already had an income that enabled them to live in relative comfort. Data from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) analysed by NCOPF show that lone parents have overtaken pensioners as the poorest group in society. More than 60% of children in one parent families are poor compared to a quarter of children living with both parents. As the number of lone parent families increases, so the poverty becomes more obvious.

The report, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) 2000), looked at the 'socially perceived necessities' that should be part of every child's life. These included food, clothes, environmental factors such as bedding and a garden, and developmental necessities. The only items not considered necessary by 50% or more of the respondents were 50p a week to spend on sweets, a computer for schoolwork and computer games. The report found that children in lone parent families are the most likely to be 'necessities deprived', being almost twice as likely as children of couples to be without one item considered necessary, and three times as likely to go without two or more items such as school trips, bicycles or reasonable quality clothing.

4.2 Income distribution – the facts

- 79% of individuals in one-parent families appear in the bottom two-fifths of the income distribution after housing costs;
- 52% are in the bottom fifth;
- 81% of children in one-parent families have family incomes in the bottom two-fifths of the income distribution, compared to 41% in two parent families;
- Research for the JRF reports that the poorest 20% of the population has seen 'no real increase in spending on toys, children's clothes, shoes and fresh fruit for the past 30 years.' (*Child Development and Family Income*, Gregg, Harkness and Machin, JRF, 1999).

The position is worse for those lone parent households with a greater number of children. 91% of lone parents of working age with three or more children appear in the bottom two fifths of the income distribution.

The 2002 *Public Service Agreement* sets out the Government targets for the reduction of child poverty:

'To reduce the number of children in low-income households by at least a quarter by 2004, as a contribution towards the broader target of halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020.'

In 2000/01, 3.9 million children were living in low-income households. (Low income

equates to 60% of median income after deduction housing costs). This represents a fall of some 500,000 since 1996/97. However, the policies adopted so far have only seen the figures return to levels experienced in 1995/96, and there are still twice the number in poverty now than there were 20 years ago.

Work undertaken by the New Policy Institute for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2002*, suggests that although the Government's targets could still be met, it is by no means clear how much further the figures will fall given that the figures available include the initial impact of the Working Families Tax Credit and National Minimum Wage.

The report published by the JRF uses data from the Family Resource Survey (FRS) to show that half of all children from lone parent families are in the poorest fifth of the population. It also shows that approximately two million children were living in workless households in 2002. This is a reduction of half a million on the peak in 1994, but the drop is not commensurate with the fall in unemployment over the same period.

4.3 The 'benefits' of employment?

All recent Government policies, for all disadvantaged groups, have stressed the importance of work as the most effective way to reduce levels of poverty.

Amongst lone parents, 50% of lone mothers are in paid work compared to some 70% of women in couples with children. NCOPF highlights work undertaken by the London School of Economics showing that 'only one fifth of the increase in child poverty in one-parent families can be attributed to the rise in the number of children living with lone parents'. Paid work, or rather the lack of it is much more likely to be the cause of the increase, with a low level of benefits as a significant contributory factor.

- 72% of children in one-parent families with no full-time worker were living in poverty in 1999/00;
- 63% (just under 1.9 million) of all poor children living with no paid worker were living in a one-parent family;
- 58% of children living with a working lone parent still fall in the bottom two-fifths of the income distribution. Where the parent works part-time the figure is 78%.

So, it is not the fact that the family structure is different per se. It is the combination of factors that attend that change, including all those barriers to paid work identified by lone parents themselves (eg lack of transport; access to childcare; lack of skills and experience; low pay and scarcity of jobs; concerns about difficulties with benefits.)

The poverty levels are made more acute because nine out of ten lone parents are women. The New Earnings Survey (NES) indicates that the full time hourly rate of pay for women is just 82% of that for men. If they work part-time this falls to 61%.

Furthermore:

- In 2000, 77% of those earning too little to pay national insurance were women;
- Over 50% of low paid workers are women working part-time;
- For lone parents as a whole, wages represent approximately 36% of gross

household income, while benefits make up 52%;

These issues lie at the heart of the social inclusion debate. It is clear that strategies to reduce child poverty cannot therefore simply focus on getting lone parents into work. The figures above show that for many working lone parents, having a job does not promise an end to poverty, nor is it the necessary route to social inclusion. Many lone parents would have no difficulty in obtaining employment. What they would find difficult is finding a job that would pay at a sufficiently high hourly rate to ensure that they can work the hours that fit in with the pressures of bringing up a family. People on low wages, and in this instance it is usually men, can work longer hours in low paid jobs to receive an adequate wage. It is not possible for lone parents to do this.

It is therefore not surprising that many lone parents, particularly those who have recently experienced a difficult relationship breakdown, feel they want to stay at home as the primary child-carer to minimize disruption for their children. Others, such as mothers from the black community, frequently see going into paid work – often at low wages for long hours – as the best way to provide for the family. Social and cultural pressures and influences must therefore be taken into account in the development of any employment policy, rather than offering just one option.

It appears that it is lone parents who have experienced the greatest difficulty in maintaining an acceptable standard of living. When discussing issues of social exclusion, the lone parent features disproportionately against many of the indicators of multiple disadvantage. Figures from the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), for example, suggest that 60% of lone parents live in social housing compared to just 20% of couples, and 80% are on income-tested benefits compared to 20% of couples.

In the past, there has been a lot of discussion on the position of lone parents in society and the dependence on benefits and social housing. Concern increases with attention drawn to the number of teenage pregnancies and the fall in the number of those living in the traditional family structure. More than a fifth of all families in Britain are headed by a lone parent – this is three times higher than 20 years ago. There is, however, a huge variation in the needs of lone parents – one size doesn't fit all. Their needs are influenced by factors such as race, age of children and family support network. There should no longer be a stereotypical view of a lone parent as a 'problem' as it has now been recognised that there are myriad routes into lone parenthood. It must also be recognised that no one is a lone parent for life as the dependency of any child inevitably weakens as it grows older, allowing the parent to make other life choices.

Whatever the needs of the individual parent, there can be no argument that the focus for the support of lone parents should always be on the welfare of the children. The right-wing argument relating to the cost to the welfare state and dependence on state benefits is misdirected – it is not the parent that is the focus of support but the children involved. Where a parent is not in work, resources should be available to support them into employment that offers sufficient income to improve the lives of the family and enable them to come out of the benefits system.

The PSI, in its long-term study of lone parents, found that 85% of lone parents had worked in the past and almost all of them are keen to work again in the future.

Benefits have been developed by the current government to encourage those bringing up

families to work rather than rely totally on benefits. Working Tax Credit tops up the earnings of working people on low incomes and includes support for the costs of qualifying childcare. Child Tax Credit is a new credit available to families with children on an income of less than £60,000 per annum.

However, the best jobs need higher qualifications, and as will be discussed in the main body of this chapter, lone parents too often have few or no qualifications and out-dated work experience.

4.4 Barriers to employment

The report, *Families, Poverty, Work and Care* (DWP, 2001), looked at survey data which informed the debate on the advantages to lone parents of working and the barriers which prevent them from doing so. In-depth, qualitative studies show that it is the availability and cost of childcare that is the largest single factor in a lone parent's decision whether or not to work. Certain other factors were also significant in the choice:

- *Financial issues* – the problems of making the transition into work from benefits and concerns whether work will provide them with sufficient income to manage;
- *Paying for housing* – there is much confusion over the Housing Benefit system, which resulted in many lone parents in social housing thinking that once they started work they would have to meet social housing costs in full. There was also confusion over the linkages between in-work benefits and Housing Benefit; that is whether and by what each might impact on the other;
- *Morale, self-confidence and hardship* – ‘low-morale’ (unfortunately not specifically defined) is four times more likely to be experienced by those in severe hardship than those not in hardship. This statement seems so obvious it is perhaps better to focus on the effect on self-confidence and self-esteem that constantly worrying about how to provide for the family would inevitably have. A vicious circle is created as those with low self-esteem and little confidence in what they have to offer are much less likely to find employment;
- *Employer attitudes* – the feeling that employers lack sympathy for the family situation, lack flexibility or are actively prejudiced. The development of family-friendly policies is an issue that can be addressed by the European Social Fund (ESF);
- *Mobility/Transport* - One of the key barriers to social inclusion (not just employment) for lone parents is access to reliable, affordable, convenient and child-friendly transport.

Transport is relevant to childcare as most lone parents use public transport to get to work, thus extending the working day and adding to the cost of childcare. There are also different experiences for the lone parent living in a rural or an urban area. Those in a town or city have a more comprehensive public transport network, but the congestion in town and city centres adds considerably to the time spent travelling. For those in rural areas, the bus services might be reliable, but infrequent, restricting the time spent away from home - and therefore preventing someone taking up employment involving shift work or the opportunity for adult education courses in the evening. Car ownership is higher in rural areas through necessity, but to run a car is more expensive owing to the greater distances travelled.

The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) report, *Making the Connections: Transport and Social Exclusion* (2002) states:

'Poor transport contributes to social exclusion ... it restricts access to activities that enhance people's life chances, such as work, learning, healthcare, food shopping, and other key activities.'

Transport is therefore at the heart of the social exclusion debate for lone parents. Not only does the availability of transport affect their own employment and training opportunities, but it also affects how they care for their children's health and well-being. Poor transport links mean that children also miss out on out-of-school activities.

Case Study

Making the Connections offers a case study relating to the experiences of a lone parent living in a rural area in the South West (Devon). 'Alison' has a 4 year old child and lives with her elderly parents. She doesn't drive and relies on her elderly father and friends for a lift. This concerns her - particularly because she can't always rely on her father should her daughter have an accident or fall ill and need medical treatment. Similarly, her daughter misses an hour of pre-school when Alison's father or a friend is unable to give them a lift.

Alison has been offered a job in a nearby town where she used to work. However, she could not get there by public transport, and if she could it would eat up the bulk of her salary:

'If we had proper transport this would help finding work. There's a job in Chard I can go to, otherwise there are not too many vacancies.'

The issues of transport and social exclusion are discussed at greater length in the *Moving Towards Inclusion* overview report.

5. LONE PARENTS IN THE SOUTH WEST

The latest Census 2001 figures show that the local authority area with the greatest number of lone parent households is the City of Bristol with 11,950. The next highest is Plymouth with 7,625. However, Plymouth has a marginally higher proportion (7.44%) of households headed by a lone parent than Bristol (7.37%). The figures, predictably, are highest in the largest urban areas (Bristol, Plymouth, Gloucester, Torbay). The table below shows all the local authority districts in the South West region with a percentage of lone parent households above the regional average of 5.42%. Only four local authorities have a percentage above the national average of 6.46%.

Area	All households (number)	All lone parent households with dependent children (number)	Lone parent households with dependent children as % of all households
England & Wales			6.46
South West			5.42
Plymouth	102,540	7,625	7.44
Bristol, City of	162,090	11,950	7.37
Gloucester	45,765	3,144	6.87
Torbay	57,420	3,812	6.64
Weymouth and Portland	27,156	1,619	5.96
Bournemouth	72,212	4,282	5.93
Exeter	46,573	2,761	5.93
Penwith	28,081	1,639	5.84
Carrick	38,598	2,240	5.80
Swindon	75,154	4,351	5.79
Taunton Deane	43,880	2,522	5.75
Mendip	42,881	2,399	5.59
Poole	59,047	3,277	5.55
Kerrier	39,478	2,174	5.51

Source: Census 2001 (ONS)

Approximately nine out of ten lone parent households in the South West are headed by a woman, in line with the national figure.

The figures are interesting when the employment patterns of lone parents are examined. Male lone parents are much more likely to work full time than their female counterparts. At a regional level figures show that nearly 59% of men work full time compared to just over 20% of women. Women are much more likely to work part-time (33% of women compared to nearly 10% of men). When the figures are examined at a sub-regional level, full time work for both sexes seems to be more common to the east of the region (most particularly districts in Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon.) - where salary levels are highest.

6. STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE - NATIONAL PROGRAMMES IN THE REGION

6.1 New Deal for Lone Parents

New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) is a voluntary scheme aimed at lone parents with at least one child under the age of 16. Participants can take up paid work for 16 hours per week or more.

A Personal Adviser (PA) based at Jobcentre Plus offers advice and support including:

- information about local job vacancies;
- help in applying for jobs including CV and interview preparation;
- advice on in-work benefits;
- help with making arrangements for childcare;
- basic skills screening;
- arranging training/education to update work skills;
- access to work-based learning;
- preparation of a personal plan for finding work;
- help with the Child Support Agency (CSA);
- ongoing support after participant starts work.

There is a fund available to an individual's PA which can pay up to £300 for items such as clothing or childcare so that a job offer can be accepted.

Lone parents are not required to look for work, but they are required to attend meetings with their PA. If Income Support claimants don't attend, benefits can be reduced. Figures for the NDLP for October 1998 to January 2002 show that there were 22,177 starts to the programme in the South West.

New Deal for Lone Parents, Oct 98 to Jan 02

Area	Number of starts
Cornwall	2,147
N Somerset, Bath & NE Somerset	1,227
Bristol & South Gloucestershire	3,414
Dorset	2,838
Exeter & East Devon	1,601
Torbay & South Devon	1,964
North Devon	830
Gloucestershire	2,645
Plymouth	1,936
Somerset	1,389
Wiltshire & Swindon	2,186
Total	22,177

Source: DWP 2002

The greatest proportion of starts was concentrated in Bristol and South Gloucestershire (15.4%), followed by Dorset (12.8%) and Gloucestershire (11.9%). These figures broadly follow the pattern of lone parent households across the region.

6.2 The National Childcare Strategy

The main aim of the National Childcare Strategy is to develop good quality, affordable childcare for children aged 0-14 in every neighbourhood, including both formal childcare and support for informal arrangements in partnership at local and national level.

The Government sees the National Childcare Strategy as a crucial component in the quest for social inclusion. The strategy was aimed to meet the needs of middle and lower income families and targeted at areas experiencing higher levels of disadvantage. The strategy utilises research that shows that good quality childcare improves the life chances of disadvantaged children, not only through the improved financial prospects of the now working parent, but actually through the care itself.

At the time of writing no data was available to assess how far the National Childcare Strategy has succeeded in supporting lone parents into work or training. For the South West, it is interesting to look at the views of those interviewed in the report, *Providing training and support for lone parents: evaluation of the SPAN Study Centre* (JRF, 2001). In that report, nearly every lone parent with a child under the age of 11 mentioned childcare costs and the importance of looking after one's children as major barriers to getting paid employment. Similarly, the most frequently mentioned barrier to education and training was childcare costs.

What we do know is that since 1997, the number of registered childcare places for under 8's has increased significantly. However, the cost and availability is still an issue for lone parents. Childcare tax credits have been provided, but still only 20% of lone parents on Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) receive the childcare credit. Work undertaken by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in 2000 indicated:

- Only 29% of lone parents use registered childcare;
- 20% of those using unregistered childcare pay for it, at greatly reduced cost;
- In an 'ideal' situation, the vast majority of parents surveyed said they would prefer an 'informal' provider (ie relatives or friends) to a registered minder in any event.

Certainly, there needs to be accurate and detailed monitoring of the scheme to check what benefit has accrued to the families in greatest need. This, like many of the strategies developed by Government to address the problems faced by the ESF target groups, is reliant upon the agencies in any local area working together to ensure that there is a seamless link between those involved in childcare and development from birth through to age 14. Again, 'partnership' is the key word.

6.3 Sure Start

The aims of the programme are:

'To work with parents-to-be, parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children - particularly those who are disadvantaged - so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school, and thereby break the cycle of disadvantage for the current generation of young children.' (Department for Employment and Skills)

Sure Start is an important component of the Government's policy to deal with child poverty and social exclusion effectively. The target is for a minimum of 500 Sure Start local programmes to be set up by the year 2004. The programmes are to be focused on disadvantaged neighbourhoods, helping up to 400,000 children. 342 programmes had been approved by October 2002.

The Government invested £452 million in Sure Start during the period 1999-2000 to 2001-02. The Spending Review in July 2000 announced an extra £580 million for Sure Start over the period April 2001 to March 2004.

The scheme has a set of specific objectives, which can be summarised as follows:

- *improving social and emotional development* – supporting early bonding and the early identification of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, with the stated target to 'reduce the proportion of children aged 0-3 in the 500 Sure Start areas who are re-registered within the space of 12 months on the child protection register by 20% by 2004';
- *improving health* – support for parents before and after the birth of a child with a stated target of a six percentage point reduction in the proportion of mothers smoking during pregnancy 2005/6;
- *improving children's ability to learn* – by promoting early learning, the improvement of language skills and the early identification of special needs. The target for this objective is to achieve a reduction of five percentage points in the number of children with speech and language problems requiring intervention by age four;
- *strengthening families and communities* – building community capacity to ensure the sustainability of the programme and 'create pathways out of poverty'. This objective seems a little less specific than the previous three, but its target is one of the most ambitious – the reduction in the number of children aged from birth to three living in workless households. By 2004 the figure should have fallen by at least 12%.

All local Sure Start programmes must provide core services such as outreach and home visiting and support for children and parents with special needs. Key principles must be adhered to, including the involvement of parents and carers to build on their life skills, and ensuring the most disadvantaged families do not suffer from any stigma by ensuring that all local families can access the services.

A regional example - Sure Start, Barton, Tredworth & White City, Gloucester

Programme Summary

'An inner city area with a large ethnic population, poor housing and few community families. Sure Start Barton, Tredworth and White City aims to work closely with four existing family centres run by education and two other community centres to enhance facilities for families with young children and bring a range of services, including well women's clinic and speech therapy, right into the heart of the community. By working closely with local parents and professionals, we aim to increase take-up of existing services and develop new services which respond to community needs.'
(www.surestart.gov.uk)

Activities

Early learning centres within pram pushing distance of all parents; befriending scheme; learning support for parents; early learning opportunities and specialist support.

7. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

7.1 The problems

As discussed previously, there is a close correlation between single lone parenthood (particularly motherhood) and low qualification levels. More than 40% of lone mothers have no qualifications.

Although the NDLP offers advice and opportunities to access training, the emphasis is on immediate entry into employment, and there are many lone parents who are keen to work but are far from 'work-ready'. They need to know that support is available to prepare them for the leap into the labour market. Low qualification levels in general mean lower wages, and many lone parents consider they are contributing more by being at home with their children than they would be in the employment opportunities immediately open to them.

Although there are indications from Government that education and training is seen as an exit route from social exclusion, education and training for many lone parents in particular is not a real priority. They are, however, a key group of 'returners' that, encouraged into the labour market, will have much to contribute towards increasing productivity levels and meeting skills needs. Supporting lone parents into work in a tight labour market experiencing serious skills shortages in vital services is critical.

NCOPF quotes research that has concluded that how recently any training has been undertaken is also important. Those who train one year are twice as likely to obtain employment the next year as those who did not (although motivation could also be a factor influencing those statistics).

However, whatever is made available must meet the needs of the target group. It has to be said that education and training per se is not seen as a key barrier to work by most lone parents. A survey conducted by MORI for NCOPF in 2001 showed that the main concerns for lone parents were:

- having to spend time away from their children (34%);
- the cost of childcare (28%);
- childcare availability (19%).

65% of parents experience high levels of stress due to attempting to achieve a work-life balance (i.e. working and caring for children). Stress was mainly due to:

- lack of paid time off with sick children;
- working hours that don't fit in with the school day;
- lack of flexibility at work;
- in-work benefits set too low.

Undertaking education and training courses can cause the same difficulties, often exacerbated by a greater reliance on benefits. The timing of courses and availability of childcare is crucial, and as research shows that only four in ten lone mothers drive and only three in ten have access to a car, opportunities must be local - sited in the areas of greatest need.

7.2 Lone parents in higher education

Lone parents wishing to enter higher education face added barriers. The PSI has identified that lone parent students were forced to borrow large sums of money to complete their course. No other group of students suffered such degrees of 'financial strain'.

Students who study part-time or on lower-level courses have a different set of barriers to face. Grant entitlement is unlikely, and student loans not available, but students will still be required to meet the cost of books and course fees. The result is a system that makes higher education financially non-viable.

Childcare, or the lack of it, is a further disincentive to study. NCOPF underlines the lack of childcare provision for parents in many universities and colleges. Similarly there is a lack of suitable accommodation as most student accommodation is for single students, therefore forcing lone parent students into expensive and possibly sub-standard private rented sector accommodation.

NCOPF has a manifesto, *Listen to lone parents*, in which it sets out the policies it would propose to support lone parents in education and training:

- Training to NVQ Level 3 and above through NDLP;
- Ignoring student loans in calculating entitlement to Income Support and tax credits;
- Start repayment of student loans higher up the scale, and to delay repayment for those bringing up children;
- The introduction of a secure system of learning accounts to encourage in-work training.

NCOPF also calls for a 'positive strategy to support and encourage lone parents to participate in education, cutting across different policy areas including education, the tax and benefit systems and the New Deal for Lone Parents.'

Good Practice in the SW Region - The SPAN Study Centre

The SPAN Study Centre (SSC) was established in 1998 with two years of pilot funding from the European Social Fund Programme. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Nuffield Foundation, Bristol City Council and the Single Regeneration Budget provided 'match funding', with 'in-kind' tutorial support from Bristol Community Education and the Workers' Education Association.

The SSC is based in the Easton area of Bristol. The three areas of Easton, Lawrence Hill and Ashleigh together contain around 65% of all lone parents in Bristol. Roughly 40% of lone parents in Bristol come from a minority ethnic background – most of these are African Caribbean. All single parents have very different needs, influenced by factors such as their race and age, their academic background and the age of their children.

When it was piloted, the SSC was aimed at addressing the training and support needs of unemployed lone parents. Continuing with the positive aspects of the pilot, it now focuses on training and support for single parents wanting to increase their self-confidence, seek employment or further education opportunities, or wanting to do something for

themselves away from their children. It offers support services to single parents in Bristol, including:

- a range of vocational and non-vocational courses delivered during school term times;
- an on-site registered crèche for up to thirteen 0-5 year olds;
- a mentoring service to single parents in need of extra support;
- volunteering opportunities to encourage participation and personal development;
- access to information, advice and guidance.

The Centre is now moving away from accreditation. Single parent mothers tend to become more educated once their children have started school and personal development is often as important as achieving a formal qualification. However, there are some people who have no qualifications of any sort, so when they complete courses at the SSC, they are presented with a SPAN certificate of achievement.

At the SSC there is one course at NVQ 2/3 level per term which is accredited. There are 'tasters' for young mothers and a variety of courses, all designed to improve self-esteem, aspirations and self-confidence. And as well as running its own courses, the SSC also acts as a signpost to other appropriate training providers. The Centre has been able to take on extra staff by training people who have been through it to become mentors themselves. There are already six people who are working as mentors now and another seven are currently being trained.

In addition to ESF, funding has been received from a charitable trust to set up an IT training centre. As the crèche is not inspected by OFSTED it is unable to stay open throughout lunch so it has to be organised into two sessions, meaning that parents are unable to leave their children there for the day. Formal courses are only offered during term time.

7.3 Do approaches like the Span Study Centre work?

In 2001 the JRF published a report entitled *Providing training and support for lone parents: evaluation of the SPAN Study Centre*. Work was undertaken by researchers from Bristol University to evaluate the effectiveness of the SSC alongside other local and national services for unemployed and disadvantaged lone parents, particularly in the light of the limited nature of the involvement of NDLP in providing training.

Key findings were as follows:

- Nearly all lone parents were on benefit when registered with the Centre;
- 96 % had worked at some time in the past, on average for nine years;
- In addition to earning enough to offer their families a reasonable standard of living, parents were ambitious, wishing to 'do something worthwhile' and 'make a difference';
- Most were looking to move into professional or managerial level occupations, most particularly in nursing, social work, office work and IT;
- The high quality of the Centre courses and the careers advice was valued. So too was the Centre's crèche;
- Nearly 50% of interviewees attributed increased self-confidence to their attendance

- at the Centre;
- A large majority mentioned health and well-being as the main goal for themselves and their children. They wanted ‘to do more than survive’;
- 50% wanted a good education for themselves and their children;
- More than 40% wanted a better house, better furniture and/or a car;
- Almost 25% hoped for a good relationship with a partner;
- The most frequently mentioned barrier to education and training was childcare costs. This is in line with other research mentioned in this chapter;
- Over 50% said that current physical or mental health problems interfered with their own or their children's activities. 20% cited these problems as a major barrier to getting a job;
- Prejudice and negative stereotypes increased feelings of low self-esteem and contributed to their feelings of low self-confidence.

7.4 Characteristics of Span Study Centre participants

The report found that the SSC attracted 151 participants and had met its original goal to serve a local, multi-racial group, experiencing social disadvantage but from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Most interviewees were women, and compared to national figures, more had never been married or cohabited. More had GCSE qualifications than the national average, with many of them carrying on to obtain those qualifications after the birth of their child.

7.5 Impact of Span Study Centre

- Most interviewees learned about the SSC from other agencies or from friends or family;
- Less than half said their main reason for registering was a particular course or workshop; frequent attendees were more likely to say they wished to improve themselves;
- The vast majority had used another training service or attended a college, as well as a range of social, health or community services in the past year or so;
- Most interviewees had heard of the NDLP, and most were generally negative or cautious about it. Only one in ten were positive. More than a quarter had seen a New Deal adviser, but very few felt they had received any real support;
- Nearly two-thirds of interviewees reported that family and/or friends had given them support as single parents;
- Virtually all those who used the SSC praised it. Interviewees most frequently mentioned staff friendliness and support;
- Support was frequently described in terms of feeling understood, valued and encouraged. Others said they benefited from meeting other single parents;
- Changes attributed to the SSC had to do with gaining new knowledge or skills, aspiring to higher goals or moving into further education or a job;
- More than a quarter praised the SSC crèche and valued the time they had to themselves, away from their children, to attend courses, be with others and take stock of their lives;
- The SSC provided a sanctuary for many and a reassuring presence for many others;

- Nearly a half of interviewees attributed increased self-confidence to SSC attendance, compared with slightly more than a fifth to the use of parallel services;
- 40% said the SSC increased their awareness of self, others and the world compared with 12% regarding parallel services;
- In contrast, parallel services were credited more with imparting new knowledge and skills.

The report concluded that the SSC and similar services can be a useful compliment to the work of other services and agencies, such as NDLP and further education colleges which are not geared up to providing the support lone parents need. However, the issue of resources and the long term funding of the project was crucial to ensure scheme development and offer the opportunity for staff to 'set and meet realistic goals.' ESF funding allowed for flexibility, offering the chance to take a long-term approach not driven by short-term output-focused agendas.

Most lone parents want to work, but having been out of the labour market for a number of years, they frequently lack confidence and the up-to-date work skills necessary to make an easy transition into work. Mothers with higher level qualifications find it easier to get work, and move into full-time work, than those with lower level qualifications. However, higher education is not for everyone. Others may receive greater benefit from basic skills training and work experience. This again highlights the difficulties of a 'one size fits all' approach to improving the employment chances of lone parents.

NCOPF undertook a large-scale employment project with lone parents in the late 1990's. At follow-up, it was found that 20% of those participating were in employment six months later, and 50-70% went into education and training. NCOPF sees this as an indication of lone parents' own commitment to improving their skills and qualifications and obtaining work that will enable them to be the 'breadwinner' for the family. It is clear that when real, accessible opportunities are offered, lone parents will take full advantage of them - something which must be considered by those developing policy to assist lone parents in education and training needs.

Suzanne Speak in *Barriers to Lone Parents' Employment: Looking beyond the obvious* (Local Economy 2000 Vol. 15 No.1) states:

'The urban policies of the 1990's have been predicated on the importance of an integrated and holistic approach to tackling social and economic deprivation ... The understanding of the importance of process has not been repeated in efforts to help lone parents into employment. Only by understanding not only the substantive barriers - such as lack of skills and child care - but also the procedural barriers to employment for lone parents, can we begin to address the issues which prevent many taking up the benefits which programmes like New Deal can offer.'