Training and support for lone parents
An evaluation of a targeted study programme

Karen John, Sarah Payne and Hilary Land

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Summary

The SPAN Study Centre

The SPAN Study Centre (SSC) was set up in early 1998 with two years' pilot funding. The SSC is part of SPAN UK – the Single Parent Action Network, which is a grassroots, multi-racial network, working locally, nationally and in Europe to support one-parent families living in disadvantaged circumstances.

Findings from the eight New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) pilot areas suggest that employment is unlikely for the vast majority of lone parents currently on benefit – at least in the short term. This is partly related to the fact that 40 per cent of all lone parents have no qualifications. Other recognised barriers to employment and education include the lack of affordable childcare, far too few family-friendly employers, and parent and child health problems.

The core aim of the SSC may be summarised as: to increase choice for lone parents on benefits by providing training, support and opportunities to think about, explore and develop their interests, talents and skills. The SSC encourages lone parents to choose what is right for them, whether to continue their training or education, gain work-related experience, find employment, or make a positive decision to delay study or work until their children are older.

The SSC is designed to meet the training and support needs of lone parents from a range of backgrounds. Open weekdays throughout the year, it offers participants one-to-one careers counselling, and training courses and workshops are tailored to meet individual needs. Free services, an on-site crèche and family-friendly scheduling are other central features, along with opportunities for involvement in SSC and SPAN UK activities as a volunteer, ready access to peer support, and high staff commitment and availability.

The external evaluation

The overall aim of the external evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the scheme within the broad context of other local and UK services designed to meet the needs of unemployed and disadvantaged single parents.

The main findings were as follows:

- *Characteristics of attenders and non-attenders.* The SSC was successful in attracting a highly diverse and not atypical group of lone parents. As intended, the majority of the 151 individuals who registered lived locally. Of those registered, 119 attended at least one day and an average of seven days. Nearly three-quarters of those registered for SSC services participated in the external evaluation interview. Ninety-seven per cent were women, but they ranged in age from 17 to 58, with an average age of 34. Teenagers and those who had their first child before they were 20 were less likely than other age groups to attend the SSC after they registered. However, level of attendance was not associated with other characteristics of disadvantage. The SSC met its goal of serving a multi-racial group living in disadvantaged circumstances, but from a range of social, educational and employment backgrounds, and interviewees exemplified the diversity of lone parents.

- *Work orientation*. While 96 per cent of interviewees were on Income Support when they registered with the SSC, 96 per cent had worked at some time in the past – for nine years on average – but 43 per cent had remained in one of the ten lowest-paid jobs throughout their working lives. Those who were working at the time of the interview were less likely to have remained in one of the lowest-paid occupations and to have older 'youngest' children. SSC interviewees rated themselves as less ready for work, but much more positively in terms of work-related skills than did lone parents in a population survey.

- *Career goals*. On the whole, SSC interviewees were an ambitious group. Not only did the vast majority wish to improve their career prospects and eventually find worthwhile occupation, a significant minority were on their way to achieving their goals. The most frequent goal was to become a social worker, a nurse or a counsellor – to 'do something worthwhile' and make a difference, as well as to make a decent living. Many others had settled on career choices that would allow them to work from home or afford family-friendly working hours and holidays. The majority were aspiring to professional or managerial level occupations, and the remainder to skilled or clerical level, but level of career goal was generally in line with qualifications already achieved – for many, after becoming parents.

- *Life goals*. While more than half mentioned having a good job or earning a good living and half wished for a good education, for the vast majority the priority was health and well-being for themselves and their children. More than two-fifths wanted a better house, better furniture and/or a car. Others mentioned wanting more money, 'to do more than survive', to move to a healthier and/or safer place, a holiday or more freedom. Nearly a quarter hoped for a good relationship with a partner.

- *Barriers to employment, education and training*. As in other studies, childcare costs and the importance of looking after one's children were cited as major barriers to getting a paid job by virtually everyone with children under the age of 11. Those with children between the ages of five and ten were no less likely than those with children under five to rate the importance of looking after their own children as a major barrier to getting a job. The main barrier to education and training was also childcare costs.

- *Health problems*. More than a fifth of interviewees cited their own or their children's health problems as a major barrier to getting a paid job, but over half of the interviewees described current physical or mental health problems that interfered with their own or their children's activities. Interviewees aged 35 and older were more likely to cite health problems as a major barrier to a paid job.

- *Use of the SSC, parallel services and the NDLP*. Most interviewees learned about the SSC from other agencies, or from a friend or family. Less than half of interviewees said their main reason for registering was a particular course or workshop, and high attenders were more likely to have said they wished to improve themselves, and less likely to have come primarily for a course or workshop. 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 New Deal for Lone Parents, and most were generally negative or cautious about it. Only one in ten was positive. More than a quarter had seen a New Deal adviser, but very few of those said they had received any real support, including being referred to the SSC. This general negativity was related to interviewees' high aspirations.

- *Support from family or friends*. Nearly two-thirds of interviewees reported that family and/or friends had given them support as single parents, and SSC attendance was found to be higher amongst those who *did not* mention the support of family or friends. Seventeen per cent of interviewees had not made significant use of the SSC or any other service. Like those who used only the SSC, only half of 'non-users' of services said they could count on the support of family or friends. This group clearly had unmet needs of the sort that the SSC had met for many others.

- *Benefits of the SSC*. Virtually all who used the SSC benefited from it. Nearly half of the interviewees mentioned staff friendliness and support – the most frequently cited benefit of the SSC. Support was frequently described in terms of feeling understood, valued and encouraged. Two-fifths said they benefited from meeting other single parents, and this was often talked about in connection with having achieved greater self-confidence and awareness of self and others. Many also mentioned the high quality of SSC courses or the careers advice they had received. Indeed, some 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 most mothers of children under five valued the time they had to themselves, away from their children, to attend courses, be with others and take stock.

- *Problems with the SSC*. Less than a third of those interviewed mentioned having a problem with the SSC. A course being cancelled was the most common problem – mentioned by about one in eight interviewees. High SSC attenders were as likely as non-attenders and low attenders to cite a problem, but, for them, the benefits of the SSC outweighed course cancellations or the discomfort of a training room.

- *Changes attributed to the SSC and parallel services*. Nearly half of the interviewees attributed increased self-confidence to

SSC attendance, compared with slightly more than a fifth to the use of parallel services. Forty per cent said the SSC increased their awareness of self, others and the world compared with 12 per cent regarding parallel services. In contrast, parallel services were credited more with imparting new knowledge and skills.

- *Satisfaction with the SSC and parallel services*. A higher level of SSC use was associated with a higher level of satisfaction with the SSC, but lower SSC use was associated with higher satisfaction with another service. Less than half of those interviewed felt familiar enough with both the SSC and another service to supply satisfaction ratings for each. Overall, the SSC was rated more positively in comparison with parallel services.

- *The psycho-social benefits of the SSC*. A comparison between SSC interviewees' self-ratings of 'morale' with the self-ratings of lone parents in other studies revealed striking similarities. While 'morale' ratings were predictably related to recent mental health problems, they were found to be unrelated to the level of SSC attendance. Other self-ratings suggested that SSC interviewees were a relatively self-confident group, although a minority were not.

Interviewees' messages about being lone parents and the supportive function of the SSC provided a powerful summary of what depleted and replenished their resources to carry on as effective individuals and parents. Prejudice and negative stereotypes wore them down, increased their self-doubts and diminished their self-confidence.

A central function of the SSC was in providing support (including the free on-site crèche) to single parents, many of whom had felt isolated, marginalised, unsupported or discouraged when they first registered. Services like the SSC can usefully complement what is on offer from the NDLP and some FE colleges.

Lessons from setting up, running and evaluating the SSC

The resources and commitment needed to make schemes such as the SSC work must be assessed fully, including the costs of under-resourcing, which tend to be carried by staff, who are in danger of burn-out. Short-term funding means that, almost before a service is established, there are questions about whether it can continue. Yet, it takes time and effort to overcome lone parents' suspicions and eroded confidence, and to meet their special needs. For example, many lone parents find it difficult to maintain course attendance and tend to drop in and out of services.

Longer-term funding that allows sufficient lead-time for scheme development, and integrates evaluation measures but postpones formal evaluation until the service is established, would help staff set and meet realistic goals instead of challenging them to succeed 'against the odds'. Rather than perpetuate the very problems such projects are meant to address, longer-term and adequate funding would give staff and clients the message that the scheme and those involved are

important and worth the investment in their 'human capital'. By recognising the resources needed to set up and run successful services for lone parents, funders can demonstrate their commitment and assume their share of the responsibility for making a positive difference in the lives of this stigmatised group.

1 Introduction

The SPAN Study Centre

The SPAN Study Centre was established in early 1998 with two years of pilot funding from the INTEGRA strand of the European Social Fund Programme. 'Matched' funding was provided by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Nuffield Foundation, Bristol City Council, the Single Regeneration Budget, and 'in-kind' tutorial support from Bristol Community Education and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). The Study Centre was developed by SPAN UK – the Single Parent Action Network, which is a grassroots, multi-racial network, working locally, nationally and in Europe to support one-parent families living in disadvantaged circumstances.

Based in inner-city Bristol, the SPAN Study Centre (SSC) was created to meet the needs of single parents living on state benefits who wish to enter the workforce and gain experience, training or further education. The Study Centre offices, training rooms and crèche are adjacent to the SPAN UK National Office, housed in two wings of a primary school in Easton, Bristol. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation encouraged and funded the in-depth evaluation of the SSC as part of its Work and Opportunity programme.

When the external evaluation got under way in January 1999, there was a core SSC staff team of five: a full-time co-ordinator, a part-time (internal) evaluator, a part-time administrator, a part-time crèche manager and a part-time deputy crèche manager. In addition, sessional crèche staff were employed according to need. A careers adviser from Learning Partnership West was available on site to SSC students one day each week. Researchers from the University of Bristol acted as the external evaluators of the project on a contractual basis.

The core aim of the SSC may be summarised as: to increase choice for lone parents on benefits by providing support and opportunities to think about, explore and develop their interests, talents and skills. The SSC encourages lone parents to choose what is right for them, whether it be to continue their training or education, gain work-related experience, find employment, or make a positive decision to delay study or work until their children are older. SSC services take into account the complex demands, financial hardships and negative stigma often associated with lone parenthood – all of which reduce choice and erode confidence (MacDermott *et al.*, 1998).

Findings from the eight NDLP pilot areas showed that 24 per cent of lone parents who were sent letters came to an initial interview with a 'personal adviser' to discuss 'moving into work'. Twenty-two per cent of those contacted agreed to participate, but only about 10 per cent who were invited to participate found jobs (Hales *et al.*, 2000). These findings suggest that employment is unlikely for the vast majority of lone parents currently on benefit – at least in the short term. Most of those who took part in the NDLP pilot schemes were already looking for work (Hales *et al.*, 2000). A recent population survey demonstrated significant movement on and off benefit and in and out of work amongst lone parents between 1993 and 1997 – without incentives or compulsion (Noble *et al.*, 1998).

Findings from the 'qualitative study' of the NDLP pilot underlined the importance of personal advisers working sensitively with the needs of lone parents in providing advice on benefits, childcare, employment and training opportunities (Finch *et al.*, 1999). However, the

NDLP is geared primarily to those who require minimal or no training to find their way into work, since funding for training and education remains a limited feature of it (Hales *et al.*, 2000). Futhermore, while the 'better-off calculation' provided by NDLP personal advisers indicated that 70 per cent of participants would be better off in work, many in that group felt that working would not be worth the slight difference it would make in their incomes (Hales *et al.*, 2000). This is hardly surprising since an estimated 40 per cent of all lone parents have no qualifications (Education and Employment Select Committee, 1998), and even those with qualifications are concentrated in low-paying occupations (Land *et al.*, 2000; MacDermott *et al.*, 1998).

Many researchers have stressed that lone parents with relatively poor educational attainment can expect only poorly paid jobs (Bryson *et al.*, 1997; Education and Employment Select Committee, 1998; Ford and Millar, 1998; Ford *et al.*, 1998; Kozak, 1997; Land *et al.*, 2000; MacDermott *et al.*, 1998; Noble *et al.*, 1998; Payne and Range, 1997). In addition, there are other significant barriers to employment and education for lone parents, notably the lack of affordable childcare, far too few family-friendly employers, and high rates of health problems amongst parents and their children (Ford and Millar, 1998).

Like the NDLP, the SSC was intended for lone parents in receipt of Income Support. In contrast to the original intention of the NDLP pilot programme, the SSC was not aimed solely nor primarily at lone parents whose youngest child was five years or older. SPAN observed that many young parents not long out of education are keen to return to study or work long before their youngest child enters school. However, because of the absence of convenient, high-quality and affordable childcare, this is difficult – if not impossible (Land *et al.*, 2000). Nevertheless, in line with SPAN's prediction, a large number of lone parents with children under the age of five volunteered for the NDLP pilot programme, and represented 24 per cent of those who participated and 27 per cent of those who found work or increased their working hours (Hales *et al.*, 2000).

The SSC's free on-site crèche and family-friendly scheduling of courses and workshops are two examples of a service designed to provide sensitive and flexible support for lone parents, whatever the ages of their children. In acknowledgement of the diversity of lone parents, SSC services were developed for people with a wide range of interests and with diverse educational and employment needs and histories. (The full schedule of course and workshop offerings, dates and attendance is contained in the Appendix.)

The SSC programme is very similar to the 'tailored menu' and 'motivational' approaches adopted by the two most highly valued of the six schemes supported and evaluated as part of the New Deal for Lone Parents 'innovative schemes' initiative (Woodfield and Finch, 1999). One-to-one careers and training advice are offered, together with a variety of courses and workshops – many of which focus on increasing self-confidence and self-development. All services are offered free of charge. Other central features of the SSC are opportunities for involvement in SSC and SPAN UK activities as a volunteer, ready access to peer support, and high staff commitment and availability.

The external evaluation

The overall aim of the external evaluation of the SSC was to assess the effectiveness of the scheme within a broad context of other local and UK services designed to meet the needs of unemployed and disadvantaged single parents.

The objectives of the external evaluation of the SSC were to:

- summarise recent relevant research on single parents, locally and nationally, with a focus on employment, training, education, childcare and other support services

- compare the characteristics of SSC attenders and non-attenders with those of lone parents locally and nationally

- explore the goals, aspirations, morale and patterns of service use of attenders and non-attenders.

SSC staff anticipated that approximately 50 lone parents would complete at least one 12- to 30-week course, attend an equivalent number of short courses or workshops or careers counselling, or take part in other Study Centre activities over the year of the external evaluation, i.e. from the beginning of January to the end of December 1999. The idea was to interview each new participant shortly after their SSC attendance began and three to six months later, and to identify a 'neighbourhood comparison group' who would also be interviewed on two occasions. However, the pattern of use of the SSC proved to be far less systematic than envisaged. More than twice as many enrolled for SSC services than anticipated, but many did not attend at all or attended only

a day or two; others attended sporadically over a long period of time.

Therefore, we decided that all those who signed up for a course or workshop, who received careers counselling and / or who elected to be a volunteer over the 21-month period from February 1998 through October 1999 would be invited to participate in at least one semi-structured interview as part of the external evaluation. The Evaluation Advisory Group agreed that £10 would be paid to those interviewed in recognition of the value of their time and to encourage participation.

Prior to October 1999, gender and postal area were the only demographic data systematically collected on all SSC participants. However, interview items elicited: participant's age, ethnic background, number and ages of children; other parent's and children's ethnicity; participant's qualifications, employment, training and education histories and housing tenure; participant's and children's health problems; participant's Income Support history, route to and length of single-parent status; and composition, marital status, and socio-economic status of family of origin.

Participants in longer SSC courses were asked about their work and training goals at their first guidance meeting, and attenders were asked again after each course or service accessed in order to assess the extent to which their goals had been achieved. In addition, those interviewed were asked specifically about their employment, education and training goals.

Interviewees were also asked how ready they were for paid work and about any barriers to pursuing or achieving their employment, training or educational aims. These questions were asked in both an open and pre-coded

format in order to compare SSC responses with the findings of the Programme of Research into Low Income Families – PRILIF (Finlayson and Marsh, 1998).

In order to measure the extent to which SSC attenders had benefited in other ways from the services they received, their perceptions of themselves, their abilities, confidence and support from others were assessed using the method employed by Finlayson and Marsh to gauge their 'morale'. Such questions might be regarded as estimating internal barriers to choice.

Confidential and interactive databases were designed in January 1999, and all available information on previous SSC participants and their children was entered. A course database was also devised to hold and update all information on completed and scheduled courses and workshops. As those registered were interviewed, their basic demographic characteristics were entered onto the databases. Eventually, information on volunteering and careers counselling was added to the databases. It was not long before the databases proved useful not only for the external evaluation, but also for the day-to-day operational and reporting needs of the SSC.

Other quantitative and qualitative data gathered as part of the interviews were coded and entered onto an SPSS data analysis file, along with the basic demographic information. Data were analysed using a variety of statistical procedures and tests to assess the statistical significance of differences and associations. Consequently, when findings are said to be 'significant', detailed analyses support that statement.

2 Lone parents nationally and locally

Background

Over recent decades, the number of lone parents has grown to 1.7 million in 1996 (Ford and Millar, 1998; Holtermann *et al.*, 1999) – nearly three times as many as 25 years ago (ONS, 1999). In 1996–97, nearly a fifth of all dependent children were living in lone-parent families – with 1 per cent in lone-father families and 18 per cent in lone-mother families (ONS, 1998). However, despite these increases, recent data suggest a levelling off in the numbers of lone parents (ONS, 1999).

There is great diversity amongst lone parents, and particular differences between lone mothers and lone fathers. Lone mothers are more often single, never married in comparison with lone fathers, the majority of whom entered lone parenthood through divorce (ONS, 1999). These differences in marital status are reflected in other differences between lone mothers and lone fathers. Lone fathers tend to be older and to have older children. They are also more likely to be in full-time paid employment in comparison with lone mothers (Payne and Range, 1998). The number of lone mothers who have never been in a long-term relationship has increased, and these women tend to be younger, unqualified and without paid employment (Payne and Range, 1998). However, the majority of lone parents move in and out of lone-parent status over time (Noble *et al.*, 1998; Payne and Range, 1998), and many lone parents rely on Income Support for relatively short periods (Noble *et al.*, 1998).

Explanations for recent increases in lone parenthood vary. There has been little change in the proportion of women having a baby alone (Kiernan *et al.*, 1998), but figures for childbirth outside marriage – particularly amongst women in cohabiting relationships – have increased. Women who become lone parents as a result of leaving cohabitation remain measured in official statistics as 'single', concealing the route to lone parenthood through relationships ending. Despite dominant stereotypes of lone mothers choosing parenthood as a route to social security, research suggests that the growth in numbers of lone parents is not a response to benefit incentives (Ford *et al.*, 1998; Goodger, 1998; Meucci, 1992). Rather, the increase reflects changing demographic patterns and, in particular, increasing divorce and other relationship breakdown often associated with social disadvantage (Ford and Millar, 1998; Kiernan *et al.*, 1998; Webster, 1997).

The most significant problems facing lone parents include financial hardship (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Ford and Millar, 1998; Ford *et al.*, 1998); higher levels of ill health – both their own and that of their children (Baker *et al.*, 1999; Popay and Jones, 1991); and social exclusion due to restricted opportunities for participation both in the labour market and in other activities (Education and Employment Select Committee, 1998). Lone parents are highly dependent on social security in comparison with two-adult families. Children in lone-parent households are more likely to be poor than those in two-parent families (FPSC, 1997).

The 1991 statistics on housing conditions nationally and in Bristol indicated that lone-parent families were more likely than others to be living in overcrowded accommodation and housing without central heating, but also more likely to have basic amenities. Only 31 per cent of lone parent housing was owner-occupied, compared with 64 per cent of all households in

Bristol. In 1991, 61 per cent of Bristol lone-parent households had no car compared with 34 per cent of all households.

The 1991 Census also indicated that there were proportionately more black (black Caribbean, black African and black 'other') lone-parent households than white, Asian or 'others' from minority ethnic backgrounds in Bristol. In the 1995 Avon Health Authority survey of families with children under five, 57 per cent of black Caribbean and African families were headed by lone parents, 13 per cent of white European families were headed by lone parents and 6 per cent of the South Asian families were headed by lone parents (Shepherd, 1997).

Other 1991 Census statistics on families in Bristol showed that 55 per cent of lone-parent heads of household were economically inactive, compared with 31 per cent of all heads of household. Furthermore, when they were employed, lone parents were under-represented amongst those in higher levels of employment and over-represented amongst lower levels. In 1991, in Easton, where the SPAN Study Centre is located, 72 per cent of lone parents were economically inactive.

Policy developments relating to lone parents

Recent national policy developments relating to lone parents have largely focused on increasing their participation in paid employment. This has been pursued most obviously through the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). In addition to the NDLP, other policies affecting lone parents' participation in paid work include the development of the National Childcare Strategy and support for 'family-friendly' employment, the introduction of Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and Childcare Tax Credit.

The WFTC replaced Family Credit from October 1999 to provide financial support to families with low income from paid employment. The WFTC is seen as less stigmatising than a welfare benefit and aims to cover over 1.5 million families within two years of being introduced. The Childcare Tax Credit (CTC) was also introduced in October 1999 to replace the Childcare Cost Disregard element of Family Credit. The CTC can be worth up to 70 per cent of the costs of 'formal' childcare, but CTC is not allowed for costs of 'informal' childcare, e.g. parents paying relatives to care for children.

Other policy developments include the 'National Childcare Strategy', which aims to ensure that high quality childcare is available for all of those who need it. They also include 'Fairness at Work', which sets out parental rights in paid employment, including rights to parental leave, and promotes 'family-friendly' workplaces providing more support for those with caring responsibilities. A recent publication on the effectiveness of particular policy strategies to help 'make work pay' (Gregg *et al.*, 1999) found that, on average, financial incentives to enter work do affect individual decisions, but more so for women than for men. They estimated that the WFTC is likely to help more people, especially women, into work than any other recent reform.

Lone parents and the labour market

Given the focus of current policy initiatives on labour market solutions, we review here

research relating to lone parents' participation in paid employment, both before and after NDLP. The focus in this section is lone mothers, as the greatest differences are found between lone and partnered mothers (Payne and Range, 1998). Lone mothers are less likely to be in paid employment compared with other women, and the gap between lone mothers and all women in terms of employment status has widened in recent decades (Education and Employment Select Committee, 1998; Noble *et al.*, 1998). The gap is greatest for lone mothers with children under five (Payne and Range, 1998). The decline in paid work amongst lone mothers has occurred despite increasing in-work benefits, and probably reflects changing labour market conditions including increased competition for low-skill and low-paid work, which may increase the difficulties faced by lone mothers with lower qualifications and childcare responsibilities (Payne and Range, 1998).

Studies suggest that three factors have the greatest effect on the likelihood of lone mothers being in full-time paid work: (1) not having further children after commencing lone parenthood; (2) having been in part-time work at the start of lone parenthood; and (3) being highly qualified (Education and Employment Select Committee, 1998; Ford *et al.*, 1998; Noble *et al.*, 1998). Movement in and out of paid work amongst lone mothers relates to the age of the youngest child and, as children get older, lone mothers' labour market participation increases (Payne and Range, 1998). Family Credit was an important factor both in lone parents retaining their labour market position and in encouraging lone parents to take up paid employment (Gregg *et al.*, 1999). Paid work is a major route out of severe hardship amongst lone parents

(Ford *et al.*, 1998; Noble *et al.*, 1998). What is more: 'Levels of material well-being were closely related to feelings of happiness, and to lone parents' judgements of themselves as competent people with control over their lives' (Ford *et al.*, 1998, p. 5).

However, in the 1990s, benefit legislation brought only a small increase in the number of lone parents moving into paid employment (Ford *et al.*, 1998), although full-time education 'significantly improved their chances of later taking up paid work' (p. 3). Recognised barriers to employment include lack of formal education and training, unavailability of affordable high quality childcare, lack of 'family-friendly' employment possibilities, the financial risk attached to paid work, social isolation, lack of confidence, poor health and travel difficulties (Education and Employment Select Committee, 1998). In addition, a disproportionate number of lone parents have health problems or children with health problems, and, for this sub-group, the barriers to re-enter the labour market may be insurmountable (Baker and North, 1999; Finch *et al.*, 1999).

In a recent survey, 78 per cent of lone parents claimed that they want either to take up paid employment, or to increase the amount of paid work they do (Noble *et al.*, 1998). Research on the effects of the NDLP in pilot areas suggests that the scheme can increase participation in the labour market amongst lone parents, although increases may be small (Hales *et al.*, 1998). Evaluation of the NDLP pilot schemes underscored the need for employment that reflects the reality of lone parents' lives, most notably their childcare responsibilities (Hales *et al.*, 2000).

Research highlights the need to recognise the specific training and education needs of lone parents if the NDLP is not to become a means of locating lone parents in low-paid, low-status and socially excluding forms of employment (Education and Employment Select Committee, 1998). The Seventh Report of the Education and Employment Select Committee (1998) identified a lack of training appropriately targeted at lone mothers, highlighting the need for single-sex programmes to support women lacking in confidence, as well as structuring programmes to take account of childcare responsibilities

Although only one private initiative located in Bristol, the SSC represents an alternative model for meeting the needs of lone parents on Income Support, which complements, rather than competes with, NDLP efforts to prepare people for work.

3 Characteristics of SSC attenders and non-attenders

SSC recruitment and attendance

Many more lone parents registered with the SSC than expected. Table 1 shows that, of the 151 individuals who signed up for SSC courses, workshops, volunteering or careers counselling between February 1998 and October 1999, as intended, the majority lived in the inner-city area where SPAN is located (that is, postcodes BS2 and BS5). Attendance ranged from nought to 73 days. Participants were grouped by 'no' (nought days), 'low' (one to four days), medium (five to ten days) and high (11 or more days) attendance. There were no significant

differences in average or 'level of attendance' by whether or not participants lived near the SSC.

Profile of the external evaluation interviewees

All those who had registered for a course, workshop, careers counselling or to become a volunteer were invited to take part in the external evaluation interview. Table 2 provides a breakdown of interview status by level of attendance.

Table 2 shows that a higher interview rate was associated with a higher level of

Table 1 Level of attendance by whether local to SSC (percentages in brackets)

Level of attendance (no. of days)		Not local to SSC		Local to SSC		Row totals	
None	(0 days)	11	(20)	21	(22)	32	(21)
Low	(1–4 days)	23	(41)	40	(42)	63	(42)
Medium	(5–10 days)	12	(21)	14	(15)	26	(17)
High	(11+ days)	10	(18)	20	(21)	30	(20)
Column totals		56	(37)	95	(63)	151	(100)
Mean days attended		6		8		7	

Table 2 Interview status by level of attendance (percentages in brackets)

Level of attendance (no. of days)		Refused		No contact /moved		Interviewed		Totals	
None	(0 days)	5	(16)	11	(34)	16	(50)	32	(21)
Low	(1–4 days)	2	(3)	14	(22)	47	(75)	63	(42)
Medium	(5–10 days)	0	(0)	5	(19)	21	(81)	26	(17)
High	(11+ days)	0	(0)	3	(10)	27	(90)	30	(20)
Total		7	(4)	33	(22)	111	(74)	151	(100)
Mean days attended		1/2		4		9		7	

attendance, but, even so, 50 per cent of those who never attended were interviewed, along with 75 per cent of those who attended only one to four days. The seven who refused to be interviewed were non- or low attenders. Contrary to initial SSC staff concerns, interviewees enjoyed talking about themselves and expressing their views.

Analyses were undertaken to determine whether SSC attendance differed by demographic variables associated with relative disadvantage amongst lone parents. Final analyses confirmed that teenage mothers were less likely to attend after they registered, and that those who were teenagers at the birth of their first child were also less likely to attend following registration. There were no significant differences in level of attendance by postcode, number of children, number of children aged five or younger, ethnic minority status, or level of education or qualifications. Those interviewed were a highly diverse (and not atypical) group of lone parents. The high level of interview participation (even amongst those

who never attended the SSC or attended very little) would suggest that those interviewed are unlikely to differ in any systematic way from those who were not interviewed.

Gender, age and age at birth of first child

As Table 3 shows, 97 per cent of those interviewed were women. This is higher than the estimated 91 per cent of women amongst all lone parents (One Parent Families, 1999), but makes sense in that lone fathers are much more likely to be in full-time employment than lone mothers (Payne and Range, 1998) and therefore ineligible for SSC services.

The average age of SSC interviewees was 34 – the same as that of all lone parents reported in a recent population survey (Marsh *et al.*, 1997). However, in another recent study, lone parents on Income Support were found to have an average age of 31 (Finlayson and Marsh, 1998). At the time of interview, only 5 per cent were under age 20, which roughly parallels the estimate that at any one time only 3 per cent of all lone parents are teenagers (FPSC, 1999).

Table 3 Interviewees' gender, age at interview, age at first child, ethnicity and age of eldest children (percentages)

Gender	Age at interview		Age at 1st child		Ethnic background		Age of eldest children
Women: 97	17–20:	5	Under 20:	23	Black or Asian:	35	Under 5: 59
Men: 3	20–25:	11	20–25:	40	White with mixed		Under 11: 87
	26–35:	43	26–35:	32	-race children:	12	Under 16: 95
	36–45:	32	36+:	5	White with white		
	46–58:	9			children:	53	
	Average age = 34		Average age = 24				

Minority ethnic background

Recent statistics suggest that 11 per cent of lone parents come from black or other minority ethnic communities, and that 55 per cent of black African or Afro-Caribbean families are headed by a lone parent (ONS, 1999). Thirty-five per cent of interviewees were black or Asian, and 12 per cent were white with mixed-race children. SSC attendance did not differ by ethnicity, and the SSC was successful in attracting and meeting the needs of participants from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Number of children and children's ages

Fifty per cent of those interviewed had one child, 30 per cent had two children, 10 per cent had three children and 10 per cent had four or more children – proportions virtually identical to the numbers of children in lone-parent families reported elsewhere (One Parent Families, 1999). The ages of interviewees' children ranged from one month to 36 years. Fifty-five per cent had children aged five or younger, and 87 per cent had one or more children aged ten or younger.

Qualifications

Noble *et al.* (1998) showed that 40 per cent of lone parents between the ages of 20 and 39 had no qualifications. In contrast, 22 per cent of those registered with the SSC had no qualifications at the time they were interviewed – although 41 per cent reported being without qualifications when they gave birth to their first child. Figure 1 shows the shift in interviewees' qualifications from the birth of their first children to the time of interview.

Those without qualifications at both points in time were somewhat less likely to attend the SSC after they had registered. However, like those with qualifications, the majority of those without qualifications did attend, and some attended many days.

Housing

The 1991 Census indicated that only 31 per cent of lone parents were owner-occupiers compared with 64 per cent of the general population. Thirty-two per cent of SSC interviewees proved to be owner-occupiers, and 55 per cent were living in local authority or housing association

Figure 1 Change in interviewees' qualifications from birth of first child to interview

At birth of first child

At interview
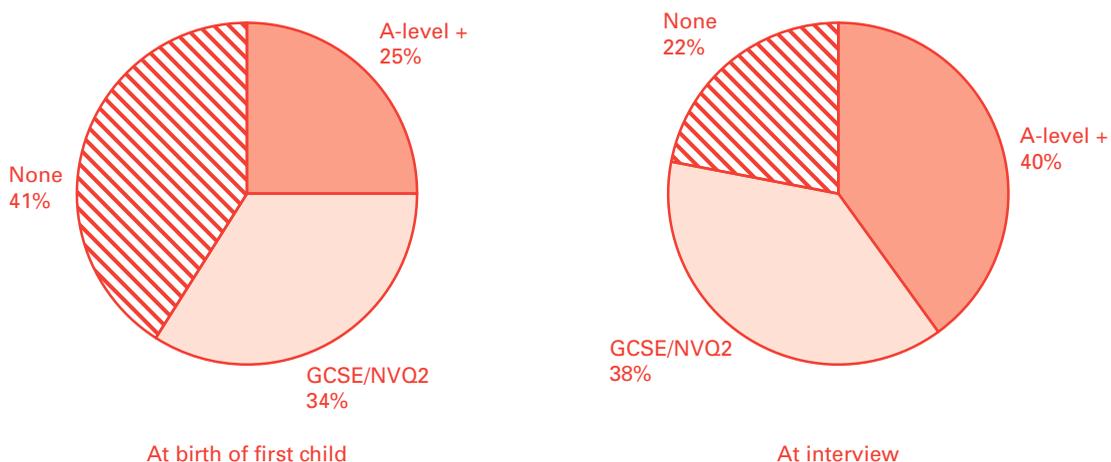
properties, including 7 per cent in supported accommodation. There were no significant differences in attendance by housing tenure.

Socio-economic status and composition of family of origin

In order to investigate links between lone parenthood and disadvantaged social backgrounds, SSC interviewees were asked about their parents' occupations and the composition of the families in which they grew up. Ten per cent of interviewees grew up in households in which their parents worked at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs with low socio-economic status (SES) – that is, SES 4 or 5. The parents of 59 per cent were skilled manual workers, owners or managers of small service or manual businesses, or clerical workers – that is, SES 3. And the parents of 30 per cent were professionals or middle to senior managers – that is, SES 1 or 2. Only one person came from a family in which neither parent worked. Compared with other family-of-origin SES groups, interviewees from SES 4 and 5 backgrounds were significantly more likely to have attended the SSC for 11 days or more. This

was a welcome finding, given the SSC's desire to meet the needs of the local inner-city community.

Sixty-one per cent of interviewees had grown up with both parents. The parents of 16 per cent of interviewees had divorced and remarried. Eight per cent were adopted or fostered. Only 14 per cent of interviewees had been raised by a single parent. Compared with other groups, interviewees whose parents had divorced were significantly less likely to have attended after they registered.

Route to lone parenthood and time spent as a lone parent

The SSC was developed for lone parents on Income Support and, as would be predicted from the link between work and route to lone parenthood (Marsh *et al.*, 1997), the majority of those registered with the SSC had never been married. However, amongst those interviewed, there was a highly significant association between age and route to lone parenthood, with older interviewees being far more likely to have been divorced than other groups (that is, aged 40 compared with aged 32 on average). Table 4

Table 4 Route to lone parenthood and time spent as lone parent (percentages)

Route to lone parenthood	Time spent as a lone parent	Percentage of eldest child's life in lone parenthood
Married, separated: 10	< 1 year: 12	2–20%: 10
Married, divorced: 22	1–3 years: 19	21–49%: 20
Partner died: 3	3–5 years: 30	50–66%: 18
Cohabited, separated: 44	5–10 years: 20	67–99%: 20
Never cohabited: 21	>10: 21	100: 32
	Average = 6 years	Average = 68%

summarises interviewees' routes to lone parenthood, the number of years they had spent alone with their children and the percentage of their eldest child's life that they had been lone parents. Level of attendance was found to be unrelated to route to lone parenthood or the length of time spent as a single parent.

On the basis of national statistics, Haskey (1998) reported that 15 per cent of lone parents had never cohabited. However, 21 per cent of SSC interviewees had never cohabited with their child(ren)'s other parent. In addition, SSC interviewees had been lone parents for an average of one year longer than the national average, that is, six years compared with five years. Furthermore, 11 per cent of interviewees who had cohabited with their child(ren)'s other parent had not actually done so since the birth of their eldest child. While national statistics suggest that, for between 55 and 60 per cent of lone parents, the route to lone parenthood is marriage ending in separation, divorce or death of partner (Ford and Millar, 1998; ONS, 1999), that was true for only 35 per cent of those interviewed as part of the SSC evaluation.

Other parent's support and contact with children

Neither the other parent's level of support nor level of contact with the children was associated with interviewees' level of SSC attendance. Fifty-eight per cent received neither emotional nor financial support from their children's other parent and 18 per cent received sporadic emotional support – and no financial support.

Work and benefits histories

While the SSC was mandated by its European funders to provide training and support services for single parents in receipt of state benefits, Table 5 shows that the wide diversity amongst SSC interviewees extended to their work and benefits histories as well. The vast majority of interviewees were on Income Support or a related benefit when they registered with the SSC, but 96 per cent had worked at some time in the past – although the length of time and number of hours worked varied considerably. Level of SSC attendance was not related to occupational level achieved, employment pattern, number of years worked,

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Table 5 Work and benefits histories (percentages)

Occupational level attained		Employment pattern		Time spent on benefit	
Unskilled/semi-skilled (SES 4 or 5):	26	Never worked:	4	None:	5
Clerical/skilled manual (SES 3):	55	A few odd jobs:	13	Less than 1 year:	16
Professional/managerial (SES 1 or 2):	15	Many casual jobs:	20	1–2 years:	13
Never employed:	4	A significant job or career:	63	2–5 years:	27
				6 years or more:	40
		Worked average = 8.8 years		On benefit average = 5.6 years	

percentage of adult life worked, or length of time on benefit.

Over half of interviewees had been employed as skilled manual or clerical workers. Interviewees had worked for an average of nine years (from none to 24 years) and for an average of 56 per cent of their adult lives (that is, 0–95 per cent of the time since they left school and were not in education or training). On average, interviewees had been in receipt of benefits for six years (from none to 25 years). Two-fifths had received benefits for six years or more.

Table 6 shows that, on average, interviewees who achieved higher occupational levels (SES 1

or 2) had spent fewer years on benefit, but that difference did not reach statistical significance.

As predicted from other studies (Bryson *et al.*, 1997), those who had achieved higher occupational levels (SES 1 or 2) were also found to have worked for significantly more years, for a significantly larger percentage of their adult lives and for significantly more hours. Not shown in Table 6 is that 79 per cent of those in SES 1, 2 and 3 level occupations had been employed in jobs to which they had felt committed and which lasted for at least 18 months, compared with only 28 per cent of those in SES 4 and 5 level occupations.

Table 6   Occupational level by time and percentage of adulthood worked and years on benefit

Occupational level achieved	Average years worked	Average % of adult life worked	Average weekly hours (last job)	Average years on benefit
SES 1 & 2	11.9	70	28	4.6
SES 3	10.4	64	31	5.5
SES 4 & 5	4.5	41	23	6.3
Never worked	0	0	0	4.9
Total	**8.8**	**56**	**27**	**5.6**

SES 1, 2 and 3 worked significantly more years and a larger percentage of adult life than SES 4 and 5.

4 Work orientation and career goals

Work history

Many researchers have noted that lack of qualifications increases the likelihood of low pay and that low pay increases the likelihood of a lone parent not working and receiving benefits (Education and Employment Select Committee,1998; Finlayson and Marsh, 1998; MacDermott *et al.*, 1998). Amongst SSC interviewees, a significant association was found amongst these factors. Forty-six of SSC interviewees (43%) who had ever worked had remained in one of the ten lowest-paid occupations throughout their working lives. Seventy-one per cent of interviewees without qualifications at the time of interview had remained in low-paid occupations, but 56 per cent with GCSE or NVQ2-level qualifications, and 18 per cent of those with A-levels or higher qualifications had as well.

Those aged 35 to 45 years had worked a greater percentage of their adult lives on average compared with those younger or older – that is, 70 per cent of their adult lives compared with 49 per cent on average amongst those younger and 53 per cent amongst those older.

Those who had achieved a higher occupational level were also likely to be significantly older – that is, those in SES 1 and 2 occupations were aged 39 on average, compared with those in SES 3 occupations who were aged 35 on average, and those in SES 4 and 5 occupations who were aged 29 on average. The average age of those who had held only the lowest-paid jobs was significantly less than the average age of those who had held other jobs – that is, aged 31 compared with aged 37.

Socio-economic status of family of origin was significantly related to interviewees' own occupational level and low pay. However, there was also substantial evidence of upward and downward socio-economic mobility amongst these lone parents.

Interviewees who were aged 26 or more when their first child was born had worked for a significantly greater percentage of their adult lives than those who were aged 25 or less when they first became parents. Interviewees who were somewhat older first-time parents were also significantly more likely to have worked at one job for 18 months or longer. Those who were aged 26 or more when their first child was born were significantly less likely to be in low-paid jobs. However, no association whatever was found between number or ages of children and interviewees' work histories.

Current orientation to work

SSC interviewees were asked how ready they were for paid work 'right now', that is, at the time of interview. Table 7 shows their responses in comparison with a population (PRILIF) sample of other lone parents (Finlayson and Marsh, 1998).

As Table 8 summarises, working was related to not working in one of the ten lowest-paid occupations and to having 'older' youngest children. A separate analysis of work readiness by age of youngest child showed that those with children under five were significantly less likely to be working and significantly more likely to say they were 'not ready' for work.

Table 7 Orientation to work: SSC interviewees compared with other lone parents

Orientation to work	SSC interviewees (%)	PRILIF working 16+ hours (%)	PRILIF not working (%)
Working	12	28	–
Very ready	22	16	23
Sort of ready	26	13	19
Not ready	40	40	55

Responses were missing for 2 per cent of PRILIF respondents in both working and not working categories.

Table 8 Readiness for work by low pay and average age of youngest child

Rating of readiness for work	Percentage working in a lowest-paid occupation	Average age of youngest child
Already working	15	8.9
Very ready	46	5.0
Sort of ready	54	6.5
Not ready	40	4.1
Overall	**43**	**5.5**

Those with children aged 11 to 15 were significantly more likely to have been working. Neither the number of hours worked in the last job held nor having worked at one job for 18 months or longer was related to readiness for work.

Career goals

Interviewees were encouraged to talk about their career goals and aspirations, however distant they seemed. All interviewees had some idea of the kind of work they might like to do in future. A few had begun working in their chosen careers, and several were on their way to achieving their training goals. Others were clear that raising their children came first and that meeting their goals probably would take a long time.

Table 9 shows the frequency of occupational and training goals by the categories derived from interviewees' responses. By far the most commonly held career goal was to be a social worker, a nurse or a counsellor – and this goal proved to be significantly more frequent amongst high SSC attenders compared with non-attenders. It was often expressed as wishing 'to do something worthwhile', but also 'to make a decent living'.

Table 9 Occupational goal, occupational level and training goal (percentages)		
Occupational goal (*n* = 111)	**Occupational level** (*n* = 111)	**Training goal** (*n* = 111)
Social worker, nurse, counsellor: 39	SES 2: 67	Short course: 43
Office/IT worker/manager: 19	SES 3: 32	Foundation or diploma course: 35
Teacher or librarian: 12	SES 1: 1	Degree course: 22
Artist or designer: 10		
Pub or shop owner: 5		
Writer or journalist: 5		
Childcare worker/manager: 4		
Trainer/consultant: 4		
University lecturer: 1		
Surveyor: 2		

One woman said: 'I'd like a career where I can use the skills I've developed through looking after and living with a disabled child. I'd like to get formal qualifications so I can have financial security as well as a satisfying job.' Another said: 'I want a job where I'm making a difference. I'm not interested in making lots of money, I just want to earn a decent wage.' A third spoke for the majority whose goal was social work, nursing or counselling. She said:

I'm starting college in September – first to do an access course in health and social work and that covers midwifery and psychology, too. I'll be able to get a better-paid job then – even if it takes four years. I'll have greater job satisfaction from doing something worthwhile and interesting.

The next most common career goal was working in an office and/or in information technology. Several had completed or begun an introductory computing and information technology or other relevant course.

Of those who wished to become teachers, which in many cases represented a career change, some were hoping to teach subjects in which they were already practised. For many, teaching was seen as offering family-friendly hours and holidays.

More than half of those hoping to earn a living in art and design work were already trained and working as artists, but were struggling to sell their work or secure contracts. The other half wished to undertake foundation courses in interior or fashion design, and one had secured funding to do so. Like the artists, the writers recognised the difficulty in earning a living using their craft. One said: 'I know I shall have to find another boring job, but hopefully, reasonably well paid and not too demanding!'

Half who wished to open a business wanted to run a pub, and half were studying health and beauty and dreamed of owning a shop or working from home. Self-employment was favoured by a number of other interviewees,

who talked about being unable to reconcile the demands of going out to work and raising their children. Amongst them were four who wished to be trainers or consultants, and many of the artists and writers. One explained:

> *They still need me to be at home – and not totally stressed out from trying to do too much. My focus must be carrying out the day-to-day activities of running a home and looking after my children. That's why I want a career I can work at from home.*

A career in childcare came low on the list of career choices. This probably stemmed from the fact that several were already trained childcare workers and had found it impossible to live on their salaries. As others have pointed out, childcare is one of the ten lowest-paid occupations (MacDermott *et al.*, 1998). The two who said they wished to be 'childcare workers' were the only interviewees whose occupational choice ranked amongst the ten worst paid.

Three-quarters of those who hoped to work in an office or IT specified SES 3 level occupations. In contrast, three-quarters of the prospective social workers, nurses and counsellors mentioned SES 2 level jobs.

Table 10 shows that the majority of those interviewed were aspiring to careers at a higher occupational level than they had already achieved. As one with five good GCSEs said: 'I very much want to get back to full-time employment, but not as a waitress!' At the same time, SSC interviewees' career goals were generally in line with the qualifications they had already obtained.

Those with A-level qualifications or higher were more likely to aspire to higher-level occupations.

Level of career goal was found to be significantly related to the occupational level of interviewees' families of origin.

More of those who had attended the SSC for 11 days or more were intending to undertake or had begun degree-level courses. At the same time, significantly fewer of those who had attended the SSC for 11 days or more were intending to do foundation or diploma courses.

Compared to a population sample of lone parents on Income Support, SSC interviewees rated themselves much higher with regard to a range of work-related skills. Finlayson and Marsh (1998) attributed the less positive self-ratings amongst their lone-parent respondents

Table 10 Occupational level of career goal, and qualifications and occupation already achieved

Occupational goal		Qualifications at interview (%)			Occupational level achieved (%)		
		None	GCSE/ NVQ2	A-level+	SES 1 or 2	SES 3	SES 4 or 5
SES 1 or 2	*n* = 75 (68%)	46	55	91	88	69	55
SES 3	*n* = 36 (32%)	54	45	9	12	31	45
Totals	*n* = 111	100	100	100	100	100	100

Those with A-level qualifications or higher were more likely to aspire to higher-level occupations.

(compared to other women) to lack of confidence and poor morale. SSC interviewees' tendency to view their abilities positively may be related to more of them having qualifications, and the fact that increased confidence and morale were cited by many as benefits of attending the SSC and/or another service. Having at least GCSE/NVQ2-level qualifications was related to higher ratings of general and office skills. Higher ratings on office skills were related to working and not being in one of the ten poorest-paid occupations.

5 Life goals and barriers to work and training

Life goals

Interviewees were asked two open questions about what they wanted in general for themselves and their children (1) 'right now' and (2) 'five years from now'. The same themes emerged from the answers to both questions, but responses to 'right now' were brief and specific, whereas fuller explanations characterised answers to 'five years from now'. Everyone mentioned at least three different goals in answer to the two questions, and, for all interviewees, what was wanted 'right now' was different from what was wanted 'five years from now'.

Health and well-being

Table 11 shows that having good health and well-being topped the list of what interviewees said they wanted for themselves and their children 'right now' and 'five years from now',

with a third describing some aspect of this theme. An additional 9 per cent said they were content as they were or satisfied with their lives, which – given the fact that most were on Income Support – suggests that they too valued well-being above the things that money can buy. As a mother of two with a serious health problem and a new part-time job expressed it:

I'm pretty happy with the way things are. I have had to give up working in jobs that require me to put in 50 hours a week, which means I have a lot less to live on. But I'm after something that is not too demanding on my health, that keeps my brain working and where I can feel I'm making a difference. I want to stay as fit and well as I can – for myself and for my kids. I think it's important for them to see me living a balanced life. At the end of the day, your health and feeling good in yourself are what really matter.

Table 11 What was wanted 'now' and 'five years from now'

	Want now		Five years from now	
Themes of replies	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Health and well-being	25	23	49	44
A good job, earning a good living	18	16	43	39
Good education (self and children)	7	6	48	43
Better housing / furniture / a car	20	18	25	23
A good relationship with a partner	4	4	22	20
Move to healthy / safe location	10	9	13	12
More money, do more than survive	15	14	3	3
Holidays, visit other places	2	2	12	11
Nothing – content / satisfied with life	10	9	0	0
More freedom	0	0	7	6

Each respondent mentioned one immediate goal and at least two five-year goals each.

A young mother of four children aged five and under said:

> *I just want a settled and stable life. I just want to be looking after my children and make sure they get what they need – learn good values and get a good education.*

Good job and education

To have a good job or earn a good living, and to get a good education for themselves and/or their children were the next most frequently mentioned goals. A 40-year-old mother of two young teenagers and an eight year old brought the top three themes together, saying:

> *Right now I'd like to feel better – to have better health so I can earn a better living. I'd really like a stress-free life! In five years from now, I'd like my kids to be going on with their education so they can get good jobs, and I'd like to have a good job myself.*

Better housing and possessions

A young mother of a two year old was ambitious in her plans and introduced a goal of many – to have a nicer house, furniture and/or a car:

> *I hope to start working full-time in three months – that is, if I can get childcare sorted out and get the New Deal to go along with a self-employment option. Then I'd like to get my business up and running, completely renovate my house, throw out all my old furniture, then maybe open a couple of shops, pay off my mortgage, and get a decent car. I'd like my son to be well adjusted and happy and in a good school.*

A 17-year-old mother living in a bed-sit with her baby simply said:

> *I'd like to be living in a two-bedroom flat, so my daughter can have her own room.*

Living in a healthier and/or safer location was mentioned fairly often. One interviewee said:

> *I wouldn't mind having another partner, but if I don't, it won't be the end of the world. What I would really like is to move nearer the countryside, to live in a healthier environment, with more space to be creative.*

Good relationship with a partner

A mother of a child who had just started school was recovering from a two-year depression following her divorce. She shared the wish of the majority for health and well-being, as well as the wish of a large number who wanted better housing. However, she was also amongst those who hoped to find a new partner:

> *I must get myself settled and sorted out. I need to get myself on the right track again – for my own sake as well as my daughter's. In five years from now, I'd like to be settled with someone else, maybe married again, and have our own house rather than living in a small flat.*

One of the artists elaborated the desire for a 'proper family':

> *Apart from having more money and being able to support us by selling my work: I'd like my son to be happy in himself, to be himself. I'd like to meet someone else – so I'd no longer be single and so my son can know what it's like to grow up in a proper family – as I do.*

More money, holidays, freedom

Some of the 16 per cent who said they wanted more money or to do more than survive went on to say what they wanted specifically. Thirteen per cent mentioned a desire to have a holiday or to be able to visit other places. A mother of a ten year old and of a 12 year old declared: 'A nice holiday would be nice, cos we haven't had one *in years!*' Another explained: 'It would be nice to be able to experience more things together as a family, rather than just be at home all the time … It's just very expensive to do anything with three children.'

The idea of having more freedom was raised by 6 per cent of those interviewed. A mother of six older children said half jokingly: 'I'd like all my kids to move out, so I can have the freedom to do *what* I want *when* I want!'

Barriers to work and training/education

All interviewees were asked the open question: 'What is stopping you from getting a paid job right now?' After they had responded in their own words, they were asked to rate a list of 12 barriers to work and training or education frequently cited by lone parents. Rating alternatives were: 'a major barrier', 'a concern' or 'not a problem'. Summaries of open replies and ratings were virtually identical. SSC interviewees rated barriers to work as more serious than barriers to training or education, but often only marginally so.

As in other studies, the greatest barrier to getting a job and training or further education was cited as 'childcare costs' (Education and Employment Select Committee, 1998). This was rated as a major barrier by 70 per cent in terms

of getting a job, and 51 per cent in terms of training and education. The next biggest barrier to getting a job was 'only poorly paid work available', with 63 per cent of interviewees rating this as a major barrier for them. 'Lack of childcare' was rated by 63 per cent as a major barrier to work, and 44 per cent as a major barrier to training or further education. When asked to rate 'poor quality childcare' as a barrier to getting work, many were confident that good quality childcare was available, stressing that the issue was not being able to afford it.

Fifty-seven per cent said that looking after their children was more important than going to work, but only 23 per cent rated 'looking after their children' as a major barrier to training or education.

Fifty-one per cent rated 'unsuitable hours' as a major barrier to work and 30 per cent as a major barrier to training or education. For the majority, a well-paying part-time job with family-friendly hours was the ideal.

Loss of benefits was rated by 53 per cent as a major barrier in terms of getting a job, and by 31 per cent in terms of getting training and further education. 'Lack of funding for the training' (required to do a job) was rated by 30 per cent as a major barrier to work, and by 43 per cent as a major barrier to training.

Health problems – either one's own or one's children's – were rated by 22 per cent as a major barrier to work, but by only 5 per cent as a major barrier to training or further education. 'Looking after someone who needs care' (for example, an ageing parent or someone else other than one's children) was rated as a major barrier to work by six people, and to training by four people.

Lack of confidence was rated by 18 per cent as a major barrier to getting a job, and to getting training or further education by 13 per cent.

Other barriers mentioned by one interviewee each were: breast feeding; lack of appropriate support for a disabled child; wishing to have time for oneself *in addition* to looking after one's child; unable to leave house unattended because of break-ins; not permanently housed; would then become responsible for partner's bad debts; the desire to be self-employed; lack of references; lack of qualifications; and currently in full-time education.

'Lack of childcare' and 'childcare costs' were rated significantly higher as barriers both to work and training or education by all groups aged 34 and younger compared with those aged 35 and older. On the other hand, 'health problems' and 'looking after someone who needs care' were rated significantly higher as barriers to work (but not to training or education) by those aged 35 and older, compared with those aged 34 and younger.

Compared to interviewees with children aged 11 and older, those with children between the ages of five and ten were no less likely than those with children under the age of five to rate 'lack of childcare', 'childcare costs', 'unsuitable working hours', 'more important to look after own children' and 'loss of benefits' as major barriers to work or to rate 'lack of childcare' and 'childcare costs' as major barriers to training or education.

Length of time out of the labour market – rather than age – probably accounted for the fact that interviewees with children aged 16 or older were significantly more likely to rate 'lack of confidence' as a major barrier to getting a job

(though not to getting training or further education).

Those with children under the age of five and between the ages of five and ten had significantly higher average ratings across barriers than those with children aged 11 and older. Average ratings across all barriers were also found to differ significantly by interviewees' occupational level, with those at SES 1 or 2 having significantly lower average ratings than those at SES 3 and those at SES 4 or 5.

Health problems

Following observations from other studies, interviewees were asked to provide details of their own and their children's health, including any disabilities, health or mental health problems, the nature of the problem and the timing, duration and severity of the symptoms. Table 12 provides a summary of the findings regarding health problems amongst interviewees and their children. Taking parents and children together, 54 per cent of SSC interviewees were coping with reasonably serious health problems (for example, back and other mobility problems, chronic pain, severe asthma, depression and/or learning difficulties). This is a higher rate than usually found and requires further exploration.

As predicted, older interviewees were found to have more physical health problems that interfered with their functioning than those in the younger age groups, but this was significant only amongst those aged 46 to 58.

Neither interviewees' own physical health problems nor their children's health problems

Table 12 Health problems amongst interviewees and their children (percentages)

Interviewees' physical health problems	Interviewees' mental health problems	Child's health problem	Family health problem
No problem: 61	No problem: 69	No problem: 46	None/minor
< monthly: 20	> 1 year ago: 7	Minor problem: 23	problem/in past: 46
1–2 times a month: 6	In past year: 16	Limits activities: 23	At least 1–2 times
Weekly: 5	Currently: 8	Disability/life	a month/limits
Almost daily: 7		threatening: 8	activities: 54

were found to be associated with their readiness for work or whether they had worked for 18 months or more in the past. However, interviewees with current mental health problems (primarily depression) were more likely to say they were not ready for work than those without current mental health problems. Furthermore, those with no history of mental health problems were significantly more likely to be working than those with a history of such problems. In addition, those with current mental health problems or mental health problems in the past year were significantly less likely to have worked at a job for 18 months or more in the past.

In order to address the findings of others with regard to the association between poverty and health problems amongst lone-parent families, interviewees' health problems were compared by their housing tenure, their occupational levels and the occupational levels of their families of origin. However, no differences were found. Physical health problems were found to be elevated amongst those who had been separated for five years or more, but this was confounded by age.

6 Benefits of the Study Centre compared to other services

Use of the SCC and other services

Figure 2 shows that the largest percentage of interviewees had heard about the SSC from another agency. 'Another agency' was most often a service for lone parents, such as Gingerbread or a young mothers' project, but GPs, health visitors and social workers were also mentioned. Friend or family member – usually someone who had already attended – were also frequent sources of information about the SSC. A few had heard about the SSC at their local Job Centre or an NDLP personal adviser. The only significant difference in attendance by how interviewees learned about the Centre was that non-attenders were more likely to have been referred by another agency. The 'other agency' mentioned by non-attenders was most likely to have been a service for teenage mothers, the group least likely to have attended at all.

Table 13 shows that the largest percentage of those who registered with the SSC had done so for a course or workshop, though less amongst attenders of more than 11 days.

Nearly a third of those who said they had come for careers advice attended five days or more. Those who attended for 11 days or more were significantly more likely to say that the wish to improve themselves was their main reason for registering, and none of that group was a non-attender. Those hoping to gain qualifications by attending the SSC tended not to be amongst the high attenders.

Interviewees were asked about other support or training services – apart from the SSC – they had used within the past year or so. Only three interviewees said they had used no services. Others mentioned between one and five different services. Interviewees' responses were grouped into nine categories, and each interviewee's responses could be fitted into from one to three of these. Table 14 provides a summary of the types of services used by interviewees in order of frequency mentioned.

Figure 2 How interviewees learned of the SSC

SPAN UK
14%

NDLP/
Job Centre
7%

Another
agency
34%

Leaflet
18%

Friend/family
27%
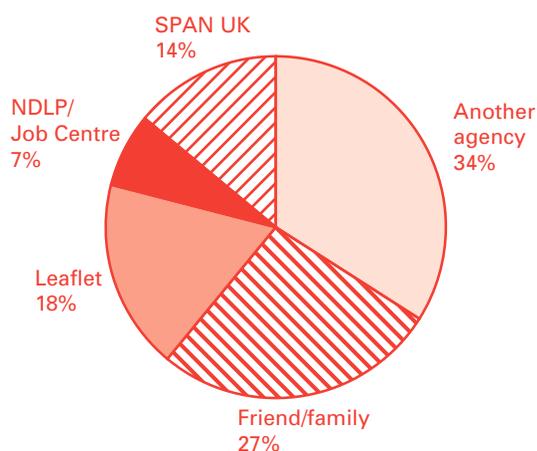
Table 13 Reason for initial SPAN Study Centre registration by level of attendance (percentages in brackets)

Why registered at SSC	None		1–4 days		5–10 days		11+ days		Totals	
Course/workshop	8	(50)	17	(36)	12	(57)	6	(22)	43	(39)
Careers advice	1	(6)	11	(23)	2	(10)	5	(19)	19	(17)
Get qualifications	0	(0)	5	(11)	1	(5)	2	(7)	8	(7)
Improve self	0	(0)	1	(2)	2	(10)	6	(22)	9	(8)
Build confidence	2	(13)	6	(13)	0	(0)	3	(11)	11	(10)
Volunteer/mentor others	4	(25)	5	(11)	1	(5)	0	(0)	10	(9)
Meet other lone parents	0	(0)	2	(4)	0	(0)	3	(11)	5	(5)
Something to do	1	(6)	0	(0)	3	(14)	2	(7)	6	(6)

Table 14 Other services used within past year or so

Type of service	*n*	%
Training	72	65
Social services or health service	43	39
College	37	33
Community centre/play group	33	30
Citizens' Advice Bureau, Legal Aid, other advice	32	29
Single-parent agency	30	27
Job Centre/NDLP	21	19
Careers advice	19	17
Minority group organisation	11	10

Interviewees mentioned 0–3 different types of services.

Nearly two-thirds of interviewees had taken advantage of at least one other training facility, and a third had attended a local college. Other frequently mentioned services were social services, GPs, health visitors and community mental health services, with more than a third mentioning one or more of these. Community centres – particularly community centre play groups – were mentioned by nearly a third of interviewees. A significant minority of interviewees had used the services of another single-parent agency.

Table 15 provides a breakdown of the level of interviewees' training by their level of qualification at the time of interview, as well as the total number of interviewees who had undertaken training at each level since they had become single parents.

All but three interviewees had undertaken at least some training since they had become

Table 15 Level of training since becoming a parent by level of qualification at interview (percentages in brackets)

Level of training	No qualification		GCSE/ NVQ2		A-level/ NVQ3+		Totals	
None	3	(13)	0	(0)	0	(0)	3	(3)
1–2 workshops/began long course	5	(21)	4	(10)	3	(7)	12	(11)
Many workshops/long course done	13	(54)	16	(38)	8	(18)	37	(33)
1–2 BTEC/NVQs/foundation level /A-levels	3	(13)	22	(52)	21	(47)	46	(41)
Degree course begun	0	(0)	0	(0)	5	(11)	5	(5)
Degree course completed	0	(0)	0	(0)	8	(18)	8	(7)
Totals	24	(22)	42	(38)	45	(40)	111	(100)

parents – though not necessarily since they had become single parents. The findings confirm that SSC interviewees were an ambitious group of lone parents. At the same time, it typically took interviewees many years to gain qualifications, as circumstances forced them to drop out and start over. So, for example, while those without qualifications were the most likely to have to have begun and not completed a long course, the success of others suggests that eventually they too will reach their training goals. Whether SSC interviewees had used other training services in the recent past was found to be unrelated to their level of SSC attendance.

Views and experiences of the New Deal for Lone Parents

The New Deal for Lone Parents became a feature of Job Centres across the UK from 31 October 1998, and SSC external evaluation interviews were conducted between mid-January and mid-December 1999. The SSC offered three separate NDLP Workshops, which were co-facilitated by an NDLP adviser who

answered questions and provided lone parents with general information about the scheme. As Table A1.1 in the Appendix shows, a total of only 15 individuals actually attended those workshops. In any case, interviewees were asked their views of the New Deal for Lone Parents and whether they had been to see an NDLP adviser. Table 16 provides a summary of their views and experience of the NDLP.

Very few interviewees were unequivocally positive about the NDLP. Several said they thought it was 'okay if it offers lone parents choice about whether to return to work or not' and/or 'okay, if there's funding to go with it!' Several others believed the NDLP was limited to low-paid, low-level jobs, while others were more negative about it, saying it was 'useless' – largely because they believed it was pressuring lone parents to work and devaluing their parenting role.

A fifth of interviewees said they knew little or nothing about it, so had formed no view of it. Interviewees' knowledge, views and use of the NDLP were found to be unaffected by the

Table 16 Views and experience of New Deal for Lone Parents (percentages)

Views of NDLP		Experience of NDLP	
Okay if gives single parents a choice:	30	None:	72
Limited to low-paid and low-level jobs:	25	Meeting of little use:	18
Know nothing about it:	20	Referred to SSC:	6
Useless: puts pressure on lone parents:	15	Helpful:	4
A good thing:	10		

average number of days from 31 October 1998 to the date of their interviews. Specifically, those who were interviewed later were no more likely to have heard about it, used it or to have had a neutral, negative or positive attitude about it. The ages of interviewees' youngest children were also found to be unrelated to their knowledge, view or use of the NDLP.

In line with the NDLP pilot findings, 72 per cent of SSC interviewees had not seen an NDLP adviser. Of those who had, few had found the meeting of use. Most believed they would not be sufficiently better off in work, although one complained about the lack of funds for training. Six of those who had seen an NDLP adviser highlighted the fact that their adviser had referred them to the SSC. Three of the four others who were helped by an adviser were young mothers who had received funding for training and/or childcare while they attended college. The fourth – a mother of a teenager – said she had felt encouraged by the review of her benefit situation and her confidence had been boosted about her ability to re-enter the job market. She, too, had been referred to the SSC where the careers adviser had helped her to find a job.

Other sources of support

Interviewees were asked who else had given them advice or support as lone parents. Seventeen per cent said 'no one', but the remainder mentioned one or two other sources. The most frequently cited were family and/or friends (64 per cent), but the SSC or another single-parent agency was mentioned by a significant minority (35 per cent). Social services, GPs, health visitors and mental health teams were the other sources mentioned, though by fewer interviewees (25 per cent).

Comparisons of level of SSC attendance by sources of support indicated that those who mentioned family and/or friends attended the SSC significantly less than those who did not mention them. Only 32 per cent of those who mentioned the support of family and/or friends attended for five or more days compared with 63 per cent of those who did not mention the support of family and/or friends.

It was possible to group interviewees by the extent to which they had used the SSC and at least one other parallel service. Table 17 provides a breakdown of interviewees according to their pattern of service use and whether they spontaneously mentioned the

Table 17 Use of the Study Centre and parallel service by support of family and friends (percentages in brackets)

Use of SSC and parallel service	Support of family or friends not mentioned		Support of family or friends mentioned		Totals	
No or little use of either	9	(50)	9	(50)	18	(16)
Study Centre only	22	(49)	23	(51)	45	(41)
Parallel service only	1	(7)	14	(93)	15	(14)
Use of SSC and parallel service	8	(24)	25	(76)	33	(30)
Totals	40	(36)	71	(64)	111	(100)

support of family or friends. It shows that 16 per cent of those interviewed used neither the SSC nor another parallel service and, like those who attended only the SSC and no other service, they were significantly less likely than the other groups to say they could count on the support of family or friends. Those who attended a parallel service were significantly more likely than other groups to say they could count on the support of family or friends.

Benefits and changes attributed to the SSC

Interviewees were asked about the extent to which the SSC had met their needs and expectations, and also whether there had been any changes in themselves or in their lives as a result of using the SSC. Their comments were overwhelmingly positive: 94 per cent made one to six positive statements – a total of 385 such statements in all. Table 18 lists the frequencies with which various themes were mentioned.

Table 18 Benefits and changes from the SSC (percentages)

Benefits		Changes	
None:	6	None:	15
Staff friendliness and support:	47	Increased self-confidence:	48
Meeting other single parents:	41	Increased awareness of self, others and/or the world:	40
Good course/careers advice:	41		
Crèche great:	28	Improved morale:	20
Support of tutor/careers adviser:	27	Changed my life:	6
Time for self:	19	Higher goals:	5
		Moved into job/further education:	5
		Gained new knowledge or skills:	4

With the help of the SSC, a mother of three children – who hoped eventually to get a job – raised several of the themes concerning the benefits and changes:

> *I needed to get to grips with the whole idea of work and to get some sort of basic skills in an environment with others who understand what you've been through – and where you can learn about yourself and build your confidence. I'm doing that here. Everyone is so nice and so supportive. At times it feels hard to make a change – to study after being out of school for so long – but I think it's important for my children to see me improving myself. This way we can all learn together as a family. And the crèche is brilliant. I mean, my son loves it, but it also gives me time for myself.*

Staff friendliness and support

Staff friendliness and support topped the list of benefits cited, with nearly half of interviewees remarking on that aspect of the SSC. One mother of a three year old said: 'I was over the moon to find a place that knew what I needed and provided real help'.

A mother of two young children explained:

> *Staff are always friendly and welcoming – and really understanding when I'm late. I'm afraid that happens more than I'd like, what with two little ones. But they never tell you off or anything. They make me feel that whether I come or not matters, and that really helps me get out of that door.*

Another summed up the sentiments of many:

> *Staff are especially sensitive to the needs and stresses of single parents and are always ready to help – whatever the problem.*

Meeting other single parents

Meeting other single parents was the core of what was valued by 41 per cent of interviewees. For example, one interviewee explained:

> *I think what's been most important is meeting others in the same situation – who know what it's like to be on your own with children.*

Other comments were: 'It's nice not being the only one' and 'It normalises my experience'. One mother of two who had just begun a college course explained:

> *The SSC served as a big stepping-stone and was a great help to me. It was the first time I actually identified myself as a single parent, whereas before I sort of denied it. I'm the only single parent in my family, and they don't know what to do with me!*

Quality courses, tutors and careers advice

Quality courses, tutors and careers advice were highlighted by 41 per cent. Some also remarked on the added bonus that SSC services were free. A typical comment was: 'It was a brilliant course, very professional – and just what I was looking for' or 'I really enjoyed and learned a lot from the courses I've done so far'. A woman who had sought careers advice and stayed on to do a couple of courses said:

> *The Study Centre has helped in so many ways. Everything's changed since I last worked, but now I know how to work out what adverts say and how to handle myself in an interview. My CV is prepared, and I'm getting some hands-on experience with computers. I'm on my way!*

Another woman who had since opened her own child-minding business said: 'I'm really

pleased with them. I enjoyed all the courses – they were presented well – and some were real eye-openers'.

The support of tutors and careers adviser were mentioned explicitly by over a quarter of interviewees, but, whenever the quality of courses or advice was mentioned, appreciation for them was also implied. However, specific comments included: 'They have really good tutors here, too. They make things accessible to everybody and encourage you to go for it' and 'the tutor managed to make a potentially threatening topic non-intimidating'.

On-site crèche

The on-site crèche was appreciated by everyone who used it, and nearly all the mothers of children under five valued having 'time for themselves', which was almost always mentioned in connection with their appreciation for the crèche. As one mother of a two year old said:

The childcare is excellent. My son settled in very well, and now he knows I'm not the only one he can rely on.

A mother of a three year old said:

The crèche has been one of the most helpful aspects: my daughter loves it, and when I know she's safe and happy, I can do just about anything!

Increased confidence

Increased confidence was cited as a change resulting from attending the SSC by 47 per cent of interviewees, even though only 10 per cent mentioned lack of confidence as a reason for SSC attendance, 18 per cent as a barrier to work

and 13 per cent as a barrier to training or education. A mother of an eight year old and of an 11 year old said:

I've got a lot more confidence back: when you've been out of the workplace long, you feel like you've been out in space, what with websites and the Internet, you don't know what they're talking about. Now I have higher goals for myself: like I said before, I'm planning to start college as soon as my daughter is a little older. In the meantime, it's great to come here – it gives you a sense of purpose. Otherwise you get taken over by parenting and always meeting other people's needs.

A mother of an 18 month old said:

I felt like I didn't belong at first, but with the encouragement of the staff, the tutor and the other women, I soon felt a part of things, and my confidence has soared!

Another mother of a toddler explained:

I no longer feel like a second-class citizen. Seeing what other single parents have accomplished has given me the confidence to go on to do another course – I'm no longer beating myself up!

Increased self-awareness or awareness of others and the world

Increased self-awareness or awareness of others and the world was often raised in statements about the value of meeting other single parents or increasing one's self-confidence. However, two-fifths of interviewees were explicit in mentioning one or more aspects of achieving greater awareness, such as this statement from a 36-year-old Asian mother of four:

I particularly learned a lot about myself – you could say greater self-awareness – particularly in relating to other people. I have a different and calmer perspective and a greater understanding of others now.

A 25 year old who was recently separated said:

I was very confused about who I was and how to direct myself before. Now I know myself better, and I'm more aware of others too.

A recent participant in a Presentation Skills workshop remembered:

Standing up in front of the group and saying how scared you were and finding that you weren't the only one who was scared made me aware of how much I was wrapped up in my own fears and problems.

Another woman confided:

I'd never thought about things in that way before, and I realised that there's a lot more going on than I ever knew about. It's like a whole new world has been opened to me.

Improved morale

Improved morale as a change brought about by SSC attendance was drawn from 20 per cent of the interviews, with statements like this from a young father who was hoping to open his own pub soon:

Coming here helps to keep my morale up. It keeps me active and busy and up-to-date with what's happening. I give it full marks!

A 35 year old emerging from a long bout of depression said:

Coming here, getting out of the house, and meeting people have helped me to feel happier in myself.

And a young mother explained the link between her improved morale and parenting:

Doing courses here gives me time for me, which makes me feel better – which makes me a better mother!

'The SSC changed my life'

'The SSC changed my life' was asserted by a few. For example, a young mother who had just taken up her place on a three-year degree course carefully explained:

Coming to the Study Centre really changed my whole outlook on life. When I'm here, I know everyone is rooting for me – encouraging me to make the most of myself. There's negative stigma attached to staying home to look after your child. My family – but especially her father's family – expected me to return to work no matter what the difficulties were. I was just not prepared to leave her, but I was left feeling alone, defending my corner. I applaud those who want to work, but I think the issue is choice, and that's what the SSC has helped me with. Going to university seems like a good compromise while she's still very young. When I finish, I'll be able to do work I enjoy, and my daughter will be older and better able to cope with my being away from her more.

A mother of three declared:

What has changed? You name it. Confidence, getting out of the house, increased aspiration, seeing different ways to bring up children. Black single mothers often only spend time with other

black single mothers, but I think it's important to mix and learn other ways of doing things. I've learned to speak out, and now I help and support others.

Problems experienced with the SSC

Interviewees were asked whether they had any problems with the SSC, and 21 per cent mentioned one problem and 12 per cent mentioned two problems. Course cancellation was the most frequently cited problem, mentioned by 13 per cent of interviewees. Poor attendance was a problem over the two years, and a few interviewees found this particularly frustrating and said this was the reason they never returned for further SSC courses. One explained:

I found it totally and utterly disorganised. Only four people turned up, so it had to be cancelled! Why can't they advertise themselves better? I'm sure there are plenty of single parents out there who would be interested. But, as far as I'm concerned, I'll stick with the college: it's closer anyway.

Six interviewees complained that they had not been notified of a change in course scheduling.

Not liking the course attended was a problem for a few and, for about half of those, it was sufficient reason for never going back: 'The first day was enough to turn me off. There was a lot of trivial discussion, and I was bored out of my mind.'

Course not being available had been a disappointment for a few when a course was either not being offered or was fully booked. Some in this group had booked onto subsequent SSC courses, but a few others were grateful to have been referred to appropriate courses elsewhere. Amongst those were two who were helped by the careers adviser to get onto a basic literacy and numeracy skills course and a general NVQ course.

A couple of interviewees commented that they had found the homework difficult and time-consuming. The building being 'shabby, 'uncomfortable', 'depressing' turned off three interviewees. Two interviewees had not warmed to the other participants on a course, and three said they had not liked the tutor or careers adviser.

Those who attended five to ten days mentioned significantly fewer problems, but those who attended 11 or more days mentioned about as many problems as those who attended nought to four days. This suggests that, while the high attenders experienced some of the same problems as low attenders, they were not discouraged by them.

How the SSC compares with other services

Interviewees who had used at least one other training service, college or lone-parent agency were asked about the extent to which their needs and expectations had been met, and also whether there had been any changes in themselves or in their lives as a result of using those services. Table 19 provides a comparison of changes that interviewees attributed to using the SSC and/or another parallel service they had accessed over roughly the same period. While only 15 per cent of interviewees were unable to cite at least one 'change' that resulted from using the SSC, 39 per cent of interviewees were unable to identify changes associated with

Table 19 Comparison of changes from using the SSC and other parallel services

	Changes from using SSC (%)	Changes from using another service (%)
None	15	39
Increased self-confidence	48	22
Increased awareness of self, others and/or the world	40	13
Improved morale	20	0
Changed my life	6	5
Higher goals	5	6
Moved into job/further education	5	8
Gained new knowledge/skills	4	29

the use of another service. This difference resulted from the fact that many interviewees had not taken advantage of a parallel service or had not used one often enough to expect or notice any changes.

The changes identified as a result of using the SSC were markedly different in several areas from those identified as a result of using other services. For example, over twice as many interviewees mentioned increased self-confidence from using the SSC, and three times as many mentioned increased awareness. While one in five mentioned improved morale as a result of using the SSC, no one mentioned improved morale as a result of using another service. On the other hand, while 29 per cent of interviewees said they had gained new knowledge or skills from another service, only 4 per cent mentioned that *spontaneously* about the SSC. In contrasting the SSC with other services, interviewees highlighted what was special about the SSC, namely the understanding, support and encouragement they received compared with having gained *only* knowledge or skills from other training providers or colleges.

Similarities between changes attributed to the SSC and other services were also found – albeit amongst much smaller numbers of interviewees. Specifically, seven said that the SSC had changed their lives, and six said that another service – namely a young mothers' supported housing scheme – had changed their lives. Seven attributed having 'higher goals' to another service (again, a young mothers' supported housing scheme) compared with six who attributed having 'higher goals' to the SSC. Finally, nine credited another service with their having moved into further education (three) or getting a job (six), compared to six who attributed such movement to the SSC.

Interviewees were asked to rate the SSC and a parallel service (the one used most) on a scale from '1' to '10', with '10' being the 'best possible' and '1' being the 'worst possible'. Average satisfaction scores for the SSC and parallel services were compared by the level of SSC attendance. Table 20 summarises the results of these comparisons, which paired the satisfaction ratings of the 65 interviewees who rated their satisfaction with both the SSC and another service.

Table 20 Satisfaction with the SSC and parallel services by level of SSC attendance

SSC Attendance	Satisfaction with SSC		Satisfaction with parallel services	
	n	Mean	*n*	Mean
None	5	7.6	13	8.0
1–4 days	44	7.5	34	7.4
5–10 days	19	8.4	14	5.6
11+ days	27	8.8	16	6.2
Totals	95	8.0	77	6.9

Satisfaction scores ranged from a high of '10' to a low of '1'.

Those who attended the SSC for five days or more rated it significantly more highly than non-attenders or those who attended from one to four days. Conversely, non-attenders and those who attended the SSC from one to four days rated the other services they used significantly more highly than those who used the SSC for five days or more. Those who felt able to rate their satisfaction with both the SSC and another parallel service rated the SSC significantly more highly than the other services they used. Analyses indicated that not only was a higher level of SSC use associated with a higher level of satisfaction with the SSC, but that lower SSC use was associated with higher satisfaction with another service. Furthermore, there proved to be limited overlap between the use of the SSC and another parallel service – that is, less than half of those interviewed felt familiar enough with both the SSC and another service to supply satisfaction ratings for each. These findings reflect the diversity of service use and need amongst interviewees. About 40 per cent welcomed and flourished in the relaxed and encouraging atmosphere of the SSC, relying on it for all their training and support needs. About 30 per cent used the SSC for training and support along with other services. However, 13 per cent used another service and not the SSC, and 17 per cent used neither the SSC nor a parallel service.

7 Assessment of the psycho-social benefits of the Study Centre

Results of self-ratings in the SSC evaluation

In order to estimate potential 'psychological barriers to choice', interviewees were asked to rate a series of 14 items designed to assess their happiness, feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Additional items were administered in the same format to assess self-confidence socially, as learners and as people of worth and value. It was hoped that these assessments might provide a measure of the effectiveness of the SSC in helping to increase positive choice amongst lone parents, whose low morale might represent a barrier to taking practical steps towards improving their circumstances. However, no significant differences in 'morale'– as operationalised by Finlayson and Marsh (1998) Programme of Research into Low Income Families (PRILIF) – were found by level of SSC attendance.

Table 21 summarises SSC interviewees and PRILIF sample ratings on the ten self-esteem items (Finlayson and Marsh, 1998). For simplicity of comparison, 'strongly agree' and 'agree' are combined as 'agree', and 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' are combined as 'disagree'. As can be seen, overall, SSC interviewees' ratings were remarkably similar to those of the PRILIF lone parents, but SSC lone parents were more likely to feel proud and less likely to feel a failure.

As predicted, lower 'morale' scores – that is the sum of happiness, self-efficacy and self-esteem item ratings – were found to be significantly correlated with recent mental health problems amongst SSC interviewees.

Table 22 summarises the other self-ratings included in the SSC evaluation – that is, interviewees' self-confidence socially, as learners and as people of worth and value. Interviewees' self-ratings would suggest that on the whole they were a reasonably self-confident group who could count on support from family and friends, and stand up for themselves and

Table 21 Comparison of SSC and PRILIF self-esteem ratings

Items	SSC % agree	PRILIF % agree
On the whole I am satisfied with myself	75	77
I feel I have a number of good qualities	100	92
I am able to do things as well as other people	90	89
I feel I am a person of worth at least on an equal level with others	91	89
I take a positive attitude towards myself	76	80
At times I think I am no good at all	44	43
I feel I do not have much to be proud of	13	27
I certainly feel useless at times	49	51
I wish I could have more respect for myself	38	42
All in all I am inclined to say that I am a failure	14	19

Table 22 Confidence, social supports, parenting attitudes

Items	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)
I feel that others enjoy my company	20	76
I feel unable to be myself even with people I know very well	2	12
When I don't understand something I'm afraid I look stupid to others	5	26
I find looking after my own children full time is very satisfying	28	46
I have family or friends I can count on for support	32	47
I am able to say what I want to those in authority	23	52
I feel comfortable meeting new people	22	66
I feel clever enough to learn new things	40	53
I don't feel I can ask family or friends for help	9	29
Looking after my own children is the most valuable job I could do	36	56
When people are prejudiced or discriminate against me, I know they are being unjust	48	49
I feel able to speak out when people are critical of single parents	43	46

their beliefs. At the same time, as was evident with the 'morale' ratings, a minority were unsure of themselves and their abilities. The only associations between 'self-confidence' ratings and SSC attendance were that higher attenders were more likely to feel that others enjoyed their company, and lower attenders were more likely to feel they could rely on family or friends for support.

Interviewees were asked if they would like to say anything else about the experience of being a single parent or using the SSC. The following provides a powerful summary of what depleted and replenished their resources to carry on as effective individuals and parents (94 per cent of interviewees made at least one comment and some made as many as three):

- 39 per cent should be more services like the SSC

- 36 per cent prejudice against lone parents erodes confidence

- 29 per cent it takes a long time to sort yourself out on your own

- 24 per cent did not choose to be a single parent/still believe in family

- 20 per cent miss the parenting support of a partner

- 14 per cent benefit system is a trap/forces cheating

- 12 per cent having a child has provided direction and purpose

- 5 per cent lonely being a single parent.

More services like the SSC are needed was mentioned by the largest percentage of interviewees and one, who had actually used the SSC very little, summed up the sentiments of many when she said:

It's a good feeling to know it's there – a kind of net in case of problems. And when you're a single mother, there are bound to be some.

Another woman who was a high attender raised that and the next most frequently mentioned theme:

The Study Centre is just brilliant: there should be more services like it. There's just so much negative stuff around about single mums being scroungers, it's hard not to let it get you down. SPAN helps build you back up: every single parent needs that.

Prejudice against lone parents had eroded their confidence was claimed by nearly as many. One simply explained:

It's hard to value yourself when others don't.

A widowed mother of two observed:

People are sympathetic if you're a widow, but I think that's really unfair. I could just as easily have been divorced. I see how prejudice wears people down.

It takes time to sort yourself out – particularly after the end of a relationship – and to move ahead positively as a single parent was the theme of many comments. For example, one woman with a degree and two young children had recently taken 'yet another' low-paid and relatively undemanding job, explaining:

Change takes a lot of time and energy. I need to keep things together at home, so I can't manage a job that's very demanding. The trade-off for me is a family-friendly and flexible workplace – but I'm left feeling angry and frustrated and wondering when I'll ever get myself sorted.

Not a single parent by choice and / or believe in family were embodied in the statement of many. A mother of a disabled three year old said:

A lot of single parents aren't single by choice. A lot of times it's to do with violence or misunderstandings about responsibility and commitment that we become single parents. I believe in family, but I also believe that one happy parent is better than two unhappy parents.

Missing the support of a parenting partner or loneliness were issues for many interviewees:

I would still like to have someone to share the load – to provide support and maybe take over in the middle of the night when he's screaming and cannot be consoled.

My family are very busy with their own lives, and I don't have many people to talk to, so I feel alone with my problems – in fact, I feel lonely much of the time.

The 'benefits trap' or system forcing people to cheat was raised by a few:

The Government don't understand how difficult it is for single parents to get into work. The only training I was offered, I wasn't interested in. And there's the horror of getting a job and not being able to afford to live and also look after your children. There's only me – no granny or auntie to help out.

One interviewee said that having a child had provided purpose and direction in her life:

At 15, I was going downhill fast, but having a baby has focused me and given me a better outlook on life. It's increased my confidence and made me proud. I'm planning to go to college in

the autumn to complete my GCSEs, then to do a health and social services course. I want to be a social worker.

The psycho-social benefits of the SSC and other services

Virtually everyone who used the SSC said they derived some benefits from it. However, some clearly benefited more than others.

It was shown earlier that only half of non-users of services and half of SSC users mentioned being able to count on the support of family or friends. This is in sharp contrast to more than 90 per cent of those who used a parallel service and more than 70 per cent of those who used both the SSC and a parallel service. This finding, together with the finding concerning what interviewees valued about the

SSC, indicate that the SSC was prized especially for its understanding, support and encouragement of single parents. These were qualities more likely to be missing from the lives of those who relied on it to the exclusion of parallel training or specialist services.

On the other hand, those who used parallel services appear to have been much less likely to require the supportive elements of SSC. Instead, they were inclined to be seeking and acquiring knowledge and skills, presumably where and when they were on offer.

At the same time, findings indicate that users of both the SSC and parallel services tended to be more satisfied with the SSC, but higher satisfaction with the SSC was associated with higher use and higher satisfaction with a parallel service with little or no use of the SSC.

8 Costs and lessons: setting up, running and evaluating the Study Centre

Difficulties associated with developing and running pilot schemes

Despite the obvious need for support and training services geared to lone parents, obtaining and maintaining adequate funding for schemes such as the SPAN Study Centre (SSC) is difficult and often cuts into staff members' time to provide the service. The SSC – like most pilot projects – was subject to uncertain start dates, difficulties in co-ordinating funding, problems in recruiting staff, and intense pressure to begin service provision and the formal evaluation before being fully operational. While integrating basic elements of evaluation from the planning stage was recognised – and might have relieved the pressure on staff – as so often happens, patchy funding made early integration impossible.

Job-related stress and turnover amongst staff

It is hardly surprising that a high level of job-related stress was observed amongst SSC staff members. The main source of stress was their job insecurity coupled with pressure to find funding to continue beyond the two-year pilot. Another source was under-staffing, and a high level of commitment meant that staff often worked more hours than contracted. Finally, as in most 'high-ideal' organisations, SSC staff strove to deliver exceptional services with scant resources and tended to set impossibly high standards for themselves.

Once it got under way, the external evaluation proved helpful in showing that the SSC attracted and served more single parents than projected (and than staff realised). Initial interviews indicated that staff and tutors were successful in delivering highly valued training, advice, and support. Despite staff effectiveness in meeting the needs of SSC participants, the original co-ordinator left for a permanent post just nine months after she was appointed. Indeed, the part-time administrator was the only staff member to remain in post throughout the pilot, but, because of recruitment difficulties, she had not taken up her post until 11 months after the first SSC course began.

Delay in beginning the external evaluation

Efforts were made to begin the external evaluation when the first full programme of courses and workshops began in October 1998, but, at that point, staff were concentrating their efforts elsewhere. It emerged that, while SSC networking and advertising efforts had been successful in attracting participants, early courses had had to be postponed because of poor rates of attendance. As the figures in the Appendix indicate, that trend improved with time, but a significant number of those who signed up for courses and workshops did not attend or attended sporadically. In that context, it was easy to appreciate staff anxiety that the external evaluation interview would alienate participants. In retrospect, nothing was lost in giving staff time to become comfortable with the external evaluation.

Advantages of attachment to SPAN UK

The disadvantages of pilot funding were mitigated to some extent by the SSC's organisational and physical attachment to SPAN UK, which has a local as well as a national presence and had been offering local training and support on an *ad hoc* basis for more than eight years. Established premises and local networks, mailing lists and placement opportunities greatly facilitated the development of the SSC.

9   Conclusions and implications

Summary of the main findings of the evaluation

The SSC effectively recruited and met the needs of a wide range of lone parents – predominantly single mothers. As part of a grassroots, multi-racial network located in the inner city, the SSC met its targets of drawing the majority of its service users from the local community, and providing high levels of training and support to those from minority ethnic and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

SSC interviewees differed from lone parents nationally on a few dimensions. More SSC interviewees were women, more had never been married and more had never cohabited with their children's other parent. Another difference was that more SSC interviewees than lone parents nationally had at least GCSE qualifications, but a significant number had earned their qualifications *after* they had become parents.

While 96 per cent of SSC interviewees were in receipt of Income Support or a related benefit when they registered with the SSC, 96 per cent had also worked at some time in their lives – for nearly nine years on average, slightly more than the national average for lone parents. In line with national survey data, those who had worked for a greater percentage of their adult lives tended to be older and to have higher qualifications, better general and office skills, and to work in higher-paying occupations. However, 43 per cent overall remained in one of the ten lowest-paid occupations.

Those working or who began working after they had registered with the SSC tended to have older 'youngest' children and were not in one of the ten lowest-paid occupations.

Virtually all interviewees cited a large number of barriers to work, but a quarter of interviewees said they were 'very ready' for work and a quarter said they were 'sort of ready'.

The greatest barriers to work were childcare costs and the importance of looking after one's own children, and were mentioned as often by those with children between the ages of five and ten as by those with children under five. For those with children under 11, childcare was also a major barrier to training and education.

Over half of interviewees described health problems that limited their own or their children's activities, but only 20 per cent cited these as barriers to work.

SSC interviewees were an aspiring group with clear career, educational and training goals, and a significant minority were on their way to achieving them. The most common career choice was to become a social worker, a nurse or a counsellor. This group wished to 'help others', 'do something worthwhile' and 'make a difference'. Teaching, self-employment and working from home were attractive choices because they were believed to offer family-friendly hours and holidays.

While interviewees wished to 'earn a decent living', the large majority mentioned health and well-being as their main goal for themselves and their children.

Interviewees had used a range of other services, and many had used another training or specialist service parallel to the SSC. The large majority had heard of the NDLP, but most were negative or cautious about it. More than a quarter had seen an NDLP adviser, but only a handful said they received any real support – including being referred to the SSC. Other parallel services – such as supported housing

schemes for young mothers, but also other training services and local colleges – were often highly rated by interviewees.

The SSC fared better in satisfaction ratings than parallel services when interviewees had enough experience of both the SSC and another service to compare.

The SSC was particularly prized for the support and increased confidence and awareness it gave to those who attended. While other services were more often said to have increased users' knowledge and skills, it would be a mistake to take this difference at face value, because SSC attenders also frequently mentioned the high quality of courses or tutors and gaining knowledge and skills. However, what had meant the most was the support – feeling understood, valued and encouraged by staff, tutors and other participants.

A central finding was that SSC attenders were less likely to mention the support of family or friends than those who relied more on parallel services.

Happiness, self-efficacy, self-esteem and other self-ratings indicated that SSC interviewees were a relatively happy and self-confident group. However, a minority of both attenders and non-attenders were not.

Seventeen per cent of interviewees had not benefited from the use of the SSC, nor from a parallel service, yet half of them felt they could not rely on the support of family or friends and were far more likely to suffer from low morale. This group clearly had unmet needs of the sort that the SSC had met for many others.

Interviewees' messages about being lone parents and the supportive function of the SSC provided a powerful summary of what depleted and replenished their resources to carry on as

effective individuals and parents. Prejudice and negative stereotypes wore them down, increased their self-doubts and diminished their self-confidence. The SSC provided a sanctuary, refuelling station or launching pad for many and a reassuring presence for many others.

The implications

Lone parents are a diverse group of individuals, with differing needs, goals and issues, yet they share the experience of raising children on their own – often without support, yet with the added burden of prejudice and negative stereotypes. Those from more advantaged backgrounds, with higher qualifications and who have reached a higher occupational level are more likely to make their way back into work and into a better financial position. However, they too are faced with unsympathetic employers and the dilemma of when and how much they should leave their children in the care of others.

Most lone parents with children under the age of 11 would like to work part time in family-friendly jobs. Those without qualifications would like to concentrate on their own training and education while their children are still young. Virtually all want to escape the 'benefits trap'.

A central function of the SSC was the provision of support (including the free on-site crèche) to single parents, many of whom felt isolated, marginalised, unsupported or discouraged.

Those with family or other support networks were more likely to access the SSC along with other training or college courses. Others relied solely on the SSC because it provided an

understanding and accepting environment in which their training and support needs could be met. All benefited considerably from their experience there.

The SSC and similar services should expect to play a supportive role for lone parents, and attempt to catch those most likely to slip through the net because they are seriously demoralised or require extra encouragement to follow through initial contact.

Given the diversity of the career goals of lone parents, it is unlikely that the SSC or similar services can provide courses and workshops to meet all their training requirements. However, by offering training designed to build confidence and basic skills, such as assertiveness, self-presentation, competing in the job market, and computer literacy and technology, the most common needs of lone parents can be addressed. Participants can then help determine which courses are offered.

Through liaison with other training providers, those who come to the SSC and similar services might be helped to access appropriate courses elsewhere.

In order to reduce the number of no-shows and dropouts on their own courses, services for lone parents are advised to encourage prospective participants to visit and become familiar with the service before actually attending a course or workshop. In this way, those who may be particularly unsure of themselves or of the service may develop a sense of connection and commitment prior to entering a group of strangers.

Services should consider the development of a supervised mentoring scheme. Such a scheme could offer counselling, support groups and a buddy system. This would involve the many other single-parent participants who are keen to share their experience and skills as they move on in their own lives and careers. The mentoring scheme could then be extended to support participants into training, education or jobs.

While there may be a number of good training and educational opportunities, few are geared to the needs of lone parents – particularly those who feel isolated or low. Furthermore, the kind of support offered by the SSC is beyond the scope of the NDLP and most FE colleges; yet, may prove to be a prerequisite to their work with lone parents. However, the SSC and similar services must be securely and adequately funded.

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Appendix: SPAN Study Centre services and attendance

Table A1.1 Course and workshop schedule and levels of attendance, February 1998 to December 1999							
Course/workshop title	Start date	Training days*	Average attendance	Participant numbers Enrolled	Began	Finished	Total days attended
Make Your Experience Count	9 Feb 1998	7	3.6	12	9	5	32
Women: Job or Career	4 Mar 1998	38	18.8	14	12	6	226
Get Ahead	18 Sep 1998	12	6.9	13	7	3	48
Training & Presentation Skills	22 Sep 1998	3	1.8	8	5	3	9
Make Your Experience Count**	23 Sep 1998	10	0	3	0	0	0
Career Development for Women	23 Sep 1998	30	12.6	15	11	4	139
CVs & Application Forms	5 Nov 1998	3	2.5	16	11	9	27
Meeting Skills	17 Nov 1998	3	2.8	9	6	6	17
Beginner's French	25 Jan 1999	10	6.3	14	13	9	82
New Deal Workshop	26 Jan 1999	1	1.0	10	8	8	8
Make Your Experience Count	27 Jan 1999	12	4.5	6	6	2	27
Training & Presentation Skills	2 Feb 1999	3	1.6	7	7	3	11
Benefits Workshop	2 Feb 1999	1	1.0	8	4	4	4
Internet Workshop	2 Mar 1999	1	1.0	15	9	9	9
Counselling Skills	4 Mar 1999	10	8.9	11	9	8	80
Voice & Body Workshop	8 Mar 1999	1	1.0	7	6	6	6
Acknowledging Our Strengths	8 Mar 1999	1	1.0	2	2	2	2
CVs & Application Forms	9 Mar 1999	3	2.0	7	4	3	8
Mentoring for Mentors	1 Apr 1999	3	2.5	8	4	3	10
Training & Presentation Skills	10 May 1999	3	2.3	12	4	4	9
CLAIT (Computers & IT)	11 May 1999	10	7.4	9	7	5	52
Plumbing Workshop	10 Jun 1999	1	1.0	12	8	8	8
Assertiveness for Women	14 Jun 1999	4	3.0	18	5	3	15
Job Market	22 Jun 1999	3	3.0	6	1	1	3
New Deal Workshop	8 Jul 1999	1	1.0	4	3	3	3
Basic Counselling (info. day)	16 Sep 1999	1	1.0	17	12	12	12
CLAIT (Computers & IT)***	4 Oct 1999	11***	6.3	15	14	8***	88
Basic Counselling Skills	7 Oct 1999	10	7.5	13	11	6	83
Career Development for Women**	20 Oct 1999	30	0	3	0	0	0
Welfare Benefits Workshop	10 Nov 1999	1	1.0	7	4	4	4
New Deal Workshop	24 Nov 1999	1	1.0	8	4	4	4

*All but two courses and three- to four-day workshops ran one day per week.

**Course cancelled due to low enrolment.

***October 1999 CLAIT course scheduled for 30 weeks, but at evaluation only 11 weeks had elapsed and eight of those who started the course had attended six days or more.

Table A1.2 Careers counselling appointments, June 1998 through December 1999

Month	Individual appointments	
	All	Advice and support*
Jun 1998	5	4
Jul 1998	3	3
Aug 1998	6	3
Sep 1998	11	8
Oct 1998	7	4
Nov 1998	10	7
Dec 1998	4	4
Jan 1999	2	2
Feb 1999	8	6
Mar 1999	6	5
Apr 1999	2	2
May 1999	4	4
Jun 1999	5	5
Jul 1999	2	1
Aug 1999	4	4
Sep 1999	2	0
Oct 1999	2	0
Nov 1999	4	4
Dec 1999	1	1
19-month totals	**88**	**67**
Monthly average	**4.6**	**3.7**

*Appointments include brief information sessions.

Table A1.3 Level of careers counselling by level of qualification at registration* (percentages in brackets)

Level of careers counselling	No qualifications/ NVQ1		GCSEs/ NVQ2		A-level/NVQ3 or above		Total registered	
None	16	(67)	22	(52)	23	(51)	61	(55)
Information only	1	(4)	3	(7)	3	(7)	7	(6)
Advice and support	6	(25)	12	(29)	12	(27)	30	(27)
Intensive support	1	(4)	5	(12)	7	(16)	13	(12)
Totals	24	(22)	42	(38)	45	(40)	111	(100)

*Fifty (45 per cent) of all those registered took advantage of the careers counselling service. There were no significant differences in level of counselling by level of qualification at the time of registration. While those without qualifications appeared less likely to seek information or advice, once they did they were as likely to receive advice and support, but somewhat less intensively as those with qualifications.

Table A1.4 Volunteers registered and level of involvement (percentages in brackets)

Total registered	Never attended	< monthly	Monthly–weekly	Weekly or more
37 (100)	17 (46)	9 (24)	6 (16)	5 (14)

Titles available in the *Work and Opportunity* series:

Making work pay: Lone mothers, employment and well-being
Alex Bryson, Reuben Ford and Michael White
This study tracks a sample of lone mothers over five years to find out what works in moving them off benefit, and what really makes a difference in easing hardship.
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Karen Gardiner
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