

Jobs not Careers

A three-year longitudinal study
of 80 mothers in London who
have been searching for work

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1 Introduction

- 1.1** ‘Supporting mothers into successful employment’ was a three-year project that aimed to demonstrate what works in providing successful employment support for mothers. It was funded by the Big Lottery Fund’s research programme and carried out by the social enterprise Women Like Us (WLU), part of the Timewise Foundation, which provides employment support for women returning to work, and the independent research organisation, the Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion (known as Inclusion). A peer research element of the project was conducted in partnership with Groundswell.
- 1.2** This report contains the findings from three waves of longitudinal qualitative research, carried out in September and October 2010, 2011 and 2012 and was also informed by results of an evidence review undertaken before the first wave qualitative fieldwork began in late 2010 (see Annex 3). The research was carried out with a broad range of London mothers; they included those living in all housing tenures, in both inner and outer London, both single and coupled mothers with a range of skills, qualifications and work experience, and a wide range of household incomes. A longitudinal qualitative approach was chosen in order to understand the employment support needs of women returners not just at the point of re-entry to the labour market but over time. In addition, the report references findings from the peer research component, which was incorporated to provide an ‘insider’ perspective on the issues raised. In order to gain insights into such perspectives, peer-led interviews were carried out at the end of each wave of research (in October 2011, July 2012 and January 2013). Annex 1 provides detail on the peer research.

Why it matters

- 1.3** Women’s participation in the labour market is seen as important by government, employers, families and individuals. Women’s employment is a priority for different government departments and agencies, although these agendas are rarely joined up. This is discussed in more detail (see paragraph 1.7).

- 1.4** Staying in work after having children is important for women in terms of maintaining financial independence and autonomy.¹ Recent analysis has shown that women's employment has been particularly important in raising living standards among low and middle income households.² In addition to being important for household budgets, a more equal division of work and caring responsibilities appears to be a preference for UK families. Among couples with a child aged under six years, in one-third of families the male worked full time and the female was not employed. However, only 13.3 per cent said this was their preferred way of splitting work and caring responsibilities.³
- 1.5** Employers too, have a stake in raising maternal employment. Many large companies are investing in improving the gender diversity of their workforces, in particular at senior management levels, where women have been under-represented.⁴ Many initiatives to improve retention of female employees have been aimed at mothers, including policies to increase flexibility, such as leaves of absence, options to alternate between part-time and full-time working, and ensuring a smooth transition before, during and after maternity leave.⁵
- 1.6** There is significant literature to show that much of the gender gap in employment and earnings is driven by motherhood.⁶ Women's and men's work behaviour diverges when children are born: women are more likely to move out of work, into part-time work and into work that is temporary and non-supervisory.⁷ Moreover, when returning to work after taking time out to look after children, certain groups of mothers find it more difficult to return, these include: older mothers; those with lower levels of

¹ D. Sands et al. (2013) *The changing labour market: delivering for women, delivering for growth*, Fawcett Society

² J. Plunkett (2011) *The Missing Million: The Potential for Female Employment to Raise Living Standards in Low to Middle Income Britain*, Resolution Foundation

³ F. Jaumotte (2003) *Female labour force participation: Past trends and main determinants in OECD countries*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

⁴ S. Devillard et al (2012) *Women Matter 2012: Making the Breakthrough*, McKinsey & Company

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See, for example: G. Paull and J. Taylor (2002) *Mothers' Employment and Childcare Use in Britain*, Institute for Fiscal Studies; H. Joshi (2002) 'Production, reproduction and education: women, children and work in contemporary Britain', *Population and Development Review*, vol. 28, pp. 445–74

⁷ G. Paull (2006) 'The impact of children on women's paid work', *Fiscal Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 473–512

education, and those with low wages and lower level occupations before motherhood.⁸

1.7 Various government departments recognise the need to promote women's employment after having children. However, barriers exist to the labour market participation for a broad range of mothers, and the drivers for government to ensure that women re-enter and progress in the labour market post motherhood are multiple. This lends itself to a siloed approach to policy-making driven by a lack of cross-departmental focus that addresses the underlying barriers women experience in the labour market that are a direct result of their caring responsibilities. The rest of this section illustrates this point in examining how the Government Equalities Office, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills all approach the 'women issue'.

1.8 The Government Equalities Office is concerned with gender equality in the workplace and has instituted a number of interventions including:

- the Women's Business Council set up to advise the government and businesses on issues such as women returning to work and how to get more women into executive positions
- a review of women on Boards. The review recommended that UK-listed companies in the FTSE 100 should have a minimum of 25 per cent female board member representation by 2015⁹
- Think, Act, Report, a voluntary programme to improve gender equality in the workplace.

1.9 In recent years, the Department for Work and Pensions has focused on increasing lone parent employment. This has been through limiting entitlement to Income Support (a benefit where the claimant does not have to look for work) and provision of employment support. Between April and June 2008, before the policy was introduced, the lone parent employment rate was 56.4 per cent, the most recent figure in the period from April to June 2012 was 59.2 per cent.¹⁰ Over the same period between 2008 and 2012, the employment rate for married or cohabiting

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ E. Davies (2011) *Women on Boards*, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

¹⁰ Working and Workless Households, 2012, Office for National Statistics

mothers decreased from 71.6 per cent to 71.2 per cent.¹¹ Increasing the employment rate of potential second earners has been less of a priority than increasing lone parent employment rates. However the introduction of Universal Credit is set to change this as potential second earners in coupled households – usually the mother – will fall under conditionality for the first time. Whilst analysis suggests that Universal Credit may disincentivise these potential second earners from entering work, a question remains about the level and type of employment support that will be offered to this group.¹²

1.10 Lone and coupled mothers' employment rates have been a concern for both the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education through their shared focus on reducing child poverty and the role of parental employment in achieving this.¹³ The link between poverty and maternal employment is not straight forward. The low quality of many part-time jobs and the high cost of childcare mean that increasing maternal employment alone will not necessarily lead to reductions in poverty. Nonetheless, nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of children in workless lone parent households are in poverty, compared to around one-quarter (23 per cent) where the lone parent works part time and 18 per cent where the lone parent works full time. Table 1.1 below shows the reduction in child poverty in coupled families when both adults are in work. This shows very low rates of child poverty in two-earner households, where at least one partner works full-time, compared to those with a single earner.

Table 1.1 Family work status and child poverty

Couple with children	% children in households with income of less than 60% median after housing costs
Both in full-time work	4
One in full-time work, one in part-time work	7
One in full-time work, one not working	29
One or more in part-time work	60
Neither in work	75

Source: Households Below Average Income Survey 2010–11, Department for Work and Pensions

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² F. Bennett (2011) 'Universal Credit: the gender impact', *Poverty*, Autumn

¹³ In order to understand the impact of increasing maternal employment in more detail, analysis was conducted to examine how much better or worse of different family types were if they moved into work of varying hours. This can be found in Annex II.

- 1.11** The Department for Business Innovation and Skills has two clear policy drivers for improving women's employment rates once they have children. The first is through its role in taking through the legislation to open up the right to request flexible working, and the introduction of a new shared system of parental leave. The second is through its oversight of the Adult Careers Service, which is increasingly being scrutinised for its ability to support people at different life stages to pursue career options. The London Assembly has recently highlighted the importance of tailored careers advice for women with children, because of the career penalties they experience in opting for part-time work.¹⁴
- 1.12** The research was conducted amongst London mothers only. Evidence highlights that of all disadvantaged groups, mothers face the greatest gap in employment rates in London compared to the rest of the UK. Coupled mothers have an employment rate 14 percentage points lower than in the rest of the UK, and lone parents a rate that is nine percentage points lower. The high rates of maternal worklessness in London have been cited as one of the main drivers for the disproportionate level of child poverty experienced in the capital.¹⁵ Regional policy-makers – through the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the London Local Enterprise Partnership – and London local authorities have a strong incentive for understanding what works in supporting mothers into work, in order to better inform regional and local strategies.

Aims and objectives

- 1.13** This project aimed to understand better the support approaches that best facilitate mothers' return to work, both lone and coupled parents. In order to do this, the project sought to understand: how mothers came to be out of work and their decisions to return, barriers to returning and how these could be overcome, and finally experiences in work and any support needs to stay in work.

¹⁴ Greater London Authority (2013) *Tailor-made: Improving adult careers services in London*

¹⁵ Fawcett Society (2012) *What about women in London? A briefing paper by the Fawcett Society in advance of the London Mayoral Elections in May 2012*, www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/What_About_Women_in_London.pdf;

London Child Poverty Commission (2012) *London Child Poverty Commission – Legacy Report: Achievements and further actions needed*, www.londonchildpoverty.org.uk/docs/LCPC-legacy-report-03-2010.pdf

- 1.14** A core objective of the project was to disseminate research findings at each stage of learning to raise awareness amongst policy-makers of the conditions required to facilitate successful employment for women with children. This included learning both in the provision of successful employment and careers support, and also an understanding of what wider labour market conditions and employer practices optimise mothers' return to work.

Methodology

- 1.15** At the beginning of this project in 2010, a rapid review of international and UK evidence was carried out, focusing on the question: 'Which employment support provisions best facilitate mothers' return to work?' The review can be found in Annex 3 of this report.
- 1.16** Three waves of qualitative interviews were carried out with mothers hoping to return to work. Participants were recruited through WLU. In the first wave, 80 interviews were carried out. Sixty of these were with mothers who had used WLU services¹⁶ and 20 were with women who had signed up for WLU newsletters but had not used any of their services. Mothers were offered an incentive payment of £20 for their time. At the point of recruitment, we asked clients some demographic questions to ensure that we were speaking to a range of women from different backgrounds. These included: housing tenure, ethnicity, highest qualification, time out of the labour market, age of youngest child and whether they were a lone parent or coupled.
- 1.17** For the second wave of fieldwork, we aimed to interview 60 of the mothers we spoke to in wave one. In order to boost the number of mothers on low incomes, we spoke to five new WLU service users identified as having household incomes below £20,000 per year. In total we spoke to 55 mothers from wave one and five new service users. Mothers were again offered a £20 incentive payment for their time. The mothers that we did not manage to re-interview had similar characteristics to those that we did interview in all categories except for level of highest qualification. The mothers that we did not speak to were more likely to have low-level qualifications than those that we managed to re-contact.

¹⁶ Mothers participating accessed a range of services from WLU, from one-off workshops to more intensive job brokerage programmes.

- 1.18** In the third wave of fieldwork, we interviewed 40 mothers who had been interviewed in either wave one, wave two or both. We recruited with the aim of achieving a good spread of mothers across those who had moved into work they were happy with, those who had moved into work they were not happy with (or had moved back out of work) and those who had not moved into work at all in either of the previous waves.
- 1.19** The peer research component ran parallel to the main study. Peer research is founded in the principle that the beneficiaries of services often have the most nuanced perspective on such services and should, therefore, be involved in any attempt to evaluate them. Peer research empowers 'peers' to generate research questions, based on their own experiences. Following these guiding principles, the peer element relied on the perspectives of peer researchers, who were recruited from the WLU service-user population.
- 1.20** All of the peer researchers involved in the study completed a weeklong training in research methods. During training, the group worked together to identify gaps in the main study and propose topics that could be fruitfully explored through follow-up interviews with the study population.
- 1.21** The peer element included three phases. During the first phase, the peer researchers organised an exploratory focus group with five participants and held 20 individual semi-structured interviews. All of the interviews were facilitated by the peer researchers, although analysis was conducted primarily by Groundswell staff. Interviews during this phase focused on motivations for returning to work, employment aspirations and barriers to employment. Participants represented a range of demographic and family backgrounds.
- 1.22** In the second phase, 13 of the 20 participants agreed to complete a follow-up interview with another peer researcher. Interviews during this phase focused on how mothers make choices about employment. In the final phase, a small focus group was organised with participants from the first and second waves. The focus group examined what makes sustainable employment for mothers.
- 1.23** As a guiding principle of peer research is a reliance on participatory methods, each wave of the peer element was focused around the use of a central activity during data collection. Further details about the peer research methodology, including information about the core participatory activities, can be found in Annex I.

Typology

- 1.24** Over the course of this study, a typology drawing together different facets of the experiences and characteristics of participants was developed in order to explore their likelihood of returning to work, and the different kinds of support that might be helpful to them. After the first wave of research, three distinct sets of experience were identified. First, clear differences emerged between lone mothers and those who were coupled. Lone mothers were more likely than coupled mothers to report that a lack of skills and experience were barriers to work and to have low level qualifications. Differences also emerged between coupled mothers whose families were comfortable on a single income and those who were not. Mothers whose families were struggling on a single income were highly motivated by the financial returns from work and would, for example, seek to minimise childcare costs. Those whose families were comfortable on a single income were less motivated by the financial aspects of work. It was important, for example, that the work that they were looking to return to built on their pre-motherhood career. This was less important for the other two groups.
- 1.25** After the second wave of interviews, it became clear that there were two quite distinct sets of experience for lone parents. One group had very quickly moved into work while the other had not moved much closer to work at all. The former tended to have higher levels of skills and work experience, and the latter were more likely to have additional barriers, such as caring for someone who was sick or disabled.
- 1.26** In total, then, four broad categories of experience based on family, work and benefits histories were identified. Some mothers' experiences cut across more than one of these categories. These groups, outlined in detail in the sections that follow will be used throughout the rest of the report and, where appropriate, for the analysis of findings.

Mother 1 – Lone parent with many barriers to work

- 1.27** Almost all of the mothers in this group lived in social rented housing. They mostly had low level skills though some had higher skills combined with other barriers to work (such as caring for a disabled child). Almost none of these mothers had moved into work at the end of the study. All of these mothers had claimed out of work benefits in the past year, either Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance or Jobseeker's

Allowance. Because these mothers were almost all eligible for Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Child Tax Credit, they were often unclear about what their household income amounted to. No mothers in this group reported a household income of more than £14,000 per year.

Case study: Ms J

Ms J is a 31 year old lone parent with three children, aged 12, 11 and six years. They live in social rented housing in an inner-London borough. Ms J became a lone parent six years ago and has not worked since she became a mother. After finishing school she gained two NVQ level 2 qualifications, one in business administration and one in care work. Before becoming a mother she had two part-time jobs, one in a fast food restaurant and one cleaning. In the past year, Ms J had not looked for work and felt that she had low confidence and had been 'lazy'. In the weeks leading up to being interviewed she had been speaking to friends and her lone parent adviser at Jobcentre Plus. This had made her think that she should move into work before her eligibility for Income Support ended and had to move onto Jobseeker's Allowance. She was hoping that her lone parent adviser would support her to find a suitable job and to do a better off calculation for her so that she would definitely be better off in work than on benefits.

Mother 2 – Coupled mother not comfortable on one income

- 1.28** Around two-thirds of these mothers lived in owner occupied housing with the remaining third in private or social rented housing (predominantly the latter). These mothers tended to have high level skills. Those who had not moved into work had household incomes of between £25,000 and £44,000.¹⁷ Those who had moved into work had household incomes of up to £70,000.

¹⁷ This level of income for a household with children closely matches the Resolution Foundation's definition of a 'squeezed' low to middle income household. See: M. Whittaker (2012) *Essential Guide to Squeezed Britain*, Resolution Foundation.

Case study: Ms N

Ms N is a 41 year old mother who lives with her husband and eight year old son in social rented housing in an inner London borough. Ms N is bilingual and has a master's degree in translation, the work she did before becoming a mother. She returned to work after her son was born but moved out of work shortly after this as her son was diagnosed with learning difficulties. Despite wanting to work she has not managed to find a job. This is because her son's behavioural difficulties have become worse. She has also limited her work search to disabled children's charities, though she will widen her search eventually if she is not successful. Ms N said the family is starting to feel financially stretched with rising prices and: 'If I get desperate enough I think I will look for any kind of work. It could happen. I'm only looking for the work that I want to do at the moment. I can still manage at the moment to be able to look for the kind of work [I want].'

Mother 3 – Coupled mother comfortable on one income

- 1.29** Around two-thirds of these mothers lived in owner occupied housing with the rest in private rented or social rented housing (predominantly the former). These mothers were almost all qualified to degree level or above. Those who had not moved into work had household incomes of between £60,000 and £90,000. Those who had moved into work had incomes of up to £150,000.

Case study – Ms P

Ms P is a 33 year old mother who lives with her three year old daughter and her husband in private rented accommodation in an inner London borough. Before becoming a mother she worked in marketing for a major international brand and worked in three different countries, finally moving to the UK. Her husband has also had an international career and works in investment banking. She returned to work full time after her maternity leave but was made redundant during the financial crisis. At the time of interview she had just got a full-time marketing job for a PR company. Her hours were 10am until 7pm, five days per week and she had been told that she would sometimes have to work weekends. Her pay is £30,000 per year, but Ms P is not particularly motivated by money as her husband earns a high salary. She feels that she is setting a good example to her daughter by working, but feels guilty that she will not be spending

as much time with her daughter, particularly given that they do not need the money from her work. Ms P said: 'definitely, it is a compromise and it's a hard decision to make, although I don't think my husband actually understands that because every time I'm like "This is hard", he's like, "Okay, if you don't want to work, you don't have to, you know."'

Mother 4 – lone parent with few barriers to work

- 1.30** Many of the mothers in this typology lived in owner occupied housing and the next most common tenure was social rented accommodation. These mothers tended to have at least mid-level skills. Two-thirds had qualifications at level 3 or above. These mothers had often been out of work for relatively short periods. Two-thirds had been out of work for two years or less. Many were living on low incomes, even in work, with the highest paid earning £30,000.

Case study – Ms C

Ms C is a 49 year old lone parent who lives with her two daughters in owner occupied housing in an inner London borough. Her daughters are aged 10 and 12. Ms C became a lone parent four years ago. She worked as a journalist before becoming a mother but did not work after becoming a mother, as she wanted to be with her children and her husband earned a good salary. Like many in this group, Ms C moved quickly into work after the first interview. She is working full-time as a project manager for a charity and earning £30,000 per year. Ms C finds it very difficult to balance work and parenting, and is particularly anxious because there is a lack of afterschool club places and her informal arrangements fell through. She does not find her work stimulating and is poorly paid compared to her pre-motherhood work. 'I [just] do all the paperwork. So I do the Piccadilly Line hell to sit at my computer in silence all day long, racing against the clock to meet deadlines.' Ms C feels that working full time was not working well but that she could not afford to work part-time. This makes her feel bad and that she is not being a good parent to her children: 'I'm not physically there for them after school and when I do get home, I'm too tired to deal with it.'

Typology in the peer element

- 1.31** During training, the peer researchers expressed concerns with the typology, as they found they could not classify themselves on the typology. Once the interviews began, they also struggled to classify many

of the participants. As a result of these concerns, the participants in the peer research were not classified by 'type'. Instead, quotes from the peer participants were classified in terms of each participant's self-identified demographic background, educational background and family circumstances (partnered or single, plus number and age of children). We have maintained these classifications in this report. This means that there are differences in the classification of quotes, depending on whether the quote came from the main part of the study or the peer element.

Report outline

- Chapter two discusses decisions around work and parenting, and what motivated the desire to return to work.
- Chapter three examines how participants moved into work, including overcoming barriers to work and employment support needs.
- The fourth chapter explores participants' experiences of looking for work, including their barriers to work and support needed to overcome these.
- Chapter five discusses the type of work that mothers moved into, their experiences in work and support needed to sustain and progress in work.

2 Deciding to return to work

2.1 This chapter discusses the factors that influenced mothers' decisions around work and caring for children. Firstly, the chapter examines the move out of work and into caring for children full time. Secondly, it discusses motivations for returning to work. Finally, the chapter examines participants' aspirations for work and use of formal childcare.

Caring for children full time

2.2 Some mothers we spoke to had decided not to return to work once their first child was born, and had no experience of being a working mother. Most mothers in our study, however, had worked since having children. It was common for mothers we interviewed not to have purposefully taken time out to care for their children. Some had initially returned to work but found it difficult to balance work and family, or had experienced negative attitudes from their employers and colleagues, and had gone back to caring for their children full time.

2.3 For mothers who had not voluntarily moved out of work, it was common for them to have left because of redundancy, often during their maternity leave or shortly after returning to work part time. This finding is in line with previous studies that have found pregnancy-related discrimination to be a significant problem in the United Kingdom.¹⁸ The finding is also linked to the recession: some mothers lost their jobs as businesses closed down and their redundancy was not apparently linked to their parental status. For example, a mother with teenage children, who had worked continuously since her maternity leave, was made redundant when the company she worked for significantly reduced the number of staff.

2.4 A key factor influencing the decision to care for children full time was work/parenting orientation. Work/parenting orientation refers to the degree to which mothers identify as workers or parents. We would expect that more work-orientated mothers would be more motivated to return to work than those who are more parenting-orientated. We would also expect more parenting-orientated mothers to hold more negative attitudes to formal childcare.

¹⁸ Equal Opportunity Commission (2005) *Greater Expectations: Equal Opportunities Commission's investigation into pregnancy discrimination*

- 2.5** None of the mothers we spoke to were completely work-orientated. This is likely to be because of the nature of our sample, as the most work-orientated mothers would be less likely to need Women Like Us's (WLU's) services. Some of the participants were strongly parenting-orientated. They were firm in their belief that mothers should provide full-time care for their children. Strongly parenting-orientated mothers were found across all typologies of mothers interviewed. For example:

'I felt like if you're going to give birth and you're going to get pregnant, then really the children are your responsibility.'

Coupled mother, comfortable on one income

'They're my children, they're my responsibility really. I don't want to pay someone else to have my kids.'

Lone mother with many barriers to work

- 2.6** Some mothers felt that their aspirations had decreased as a result of motherhood, and that work was no longer as important to them. Often this was linked with a desire to spend less time at work, and a belief that shorter hours were not compatible with the industries they had worked in before motherhood. This was particularly the case for coupled mothers comfortable on one income who had well-developed careers before motherhood. For example:

'I've changed massively. I don't want a high-powered career. I want low stress; I want flexibility without feeling guilty about leaving at quarter to five.'

Coupled mother, comfortable on one income

- 2.7** Almost all of the participants, including those with strong work orientation, believed that the time that they had spent caring for their children was beneficial to the children. The following participant reported:

'I think there are positives about being there for your children. I think it does give them confidence that you're there.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 2.8** It was less common for mothers to believe that caring full time was beneficial for them personally though some heavily parenting-orientated mothers did think this. For example:

'Well, the positives would be sort of time spent with children, which is a hugely beneficial thing in life all round, and irreplaceable really. So, I think that's been beneficial for myself and for the children.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 2.9** It was more common for mothers to believe that, while caring for their children was beneficial for their children, it had a negative effect upon them personally. Many mothers, particularly those who were in senior roles prior to motherhood, found the day-to-day reality of looking after young children lacking in stimulation. The loss of social interaction at work was felt keenly by many of these mothers. These negative effects included: loss of professional identity and income, lack of stimulation and isolation. This view was most commonly, but not always, expressed by coupled mothers comfortable on one income and lone parents with few barriers to work.

'Caring for them has meant an enormous loneliness for me. I have a few friends who have never worked before and for them it's not as much of a loss because they've never known any different. But for me, I was working, I had quite a good job, quite a lot of responsibility, and to suddenly not be doing it anymore and to be following a toddler and young children around is an enormous difference. Very, very lonely. Isolating and lonely.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 2.10** Other participants emphasised the loss of self-esteem that accompanied the removal of status associated with their work. For example:

'The sense of self-esteem that one gets from working doesn't exist, and no matter what anybody says, it's not glamorous staying home and taking care of kids. I mean, unless that's what you're meant to do. I've got a master's degree: that's not what I was meant to do.'

Coupled mother, comfortable on one income

- 2.11** Participants in the peer element also expressed feelings of low self-esteem linked to the loss of professional status. For most, this appeared to be the result of a perception that unpaid work, including motherhood itself, is not really 'work'.

- 2.12** For instance, although many participants were doing a significant amount of voluntary work in their communities, they were unlikely to consider it as relevant or valuable:

'I felt that other people would think... actually part-time and charity work is not a job. It's what women do when they have children.'

Owner-occupied housing, HND, partnered with twins age 12)

- 2.13** Participants also stressed that motherhood and domestic responsibilities are not valued in society. Although most privately described their identity as 'just a mum', when given the hypothetical situation of answering the 'What do you do?' question at public events, most said they would respond with a job title, even when describing their home-based responsibilities:

'I manage everyone... I am the backbone. I am everybody's PA. Or I am the home economist.'

British, owner-occupied housing, aged 46 plus, degree, partnered with twins age 13

'I would just say I am a homemaker... Well it's just stating the facts really. Whether you like it or not, that's what you have to kind of say. Because you are a homemaker looking for work. But that's your job title at the end of the day, isn't it?'

British/English, housing association, aged 26–35, degree, partnered with two children aged five and two

- 2.14** This suggests that many women prefer to project a professional identity in public. As mothers remain out of the labour market, their own perception that motherhood and unpaid work are not legitimate, valued 'work' appears to have a negative impact on their self-esteem.

- 2.15** Furthermore, some mothers felt a loss of financial independence. One mother described this when discussing the positives of moving back into work:

'It's very, very stressful. Especially when you have been financially independent, you have your own money. Suddenly, I had my children, I don't have that freedom anymore, like your whole life is just completely changed. You are not progressing any more.'

And to be dependent on my husband, that's the worst, that's the worst thing I have to deal with.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 2.16** Despite having positive experiences of work and keenly feeling its absence, relatively few mothers had attempted to stay in touch with former colleagues or developments in their industries. Those that did, were most likely to be coupled mothers comfortable on one income or lone parents with few barriers to work. Both groups of mothers largely held well paid, senior roles before becoming mothers. Across the three waves of research, many mothers from these two groups used these networks to move back into work successfully (see chapter 3).
- 2.17** Previous research has shown that work/parenting orientation is not necessarily static but can change over time, for example, as children get older or attitudes to childcare change.¹⁹ There is some evidence that unsuccessfully trying to combine work and parenting may itself reduce work orientation.²⁰ Many mothers in our study spoke of their work orientation changing over time. For some, as their children got older their desire to go back to work increased. For example:

'I wanted to take care of them at a young age, but now I really want to go to work and I just need to get out of the house. So when they were younger I couldn't think of going to work but now, yes, because they are getting older.'

Lone parent with many barriers to work

Making decisions about employment

- 2.18** During preparation for the first wave of peer research, the peer researchers picked up on the idea of changing orientations as being a particularly important consideration that is often lost in the discourse surrounding mothers and employment. As a result, the first phase of the peer research focused explicitly on how employment choices change for mothers over time.

¹⁹ A. Bell et al. (2005) *A question of balance: lone parents, childcare and work*, Research Report 230, Department for Work and Pensions

²⁰ M. van Haam and F. Buchel (2006) 'Unwilling or Unable? Spatial and socio-economic restrictions on females' labour market access', *Regional Studies*, Vol 40, No.3

- 2.19** The findings of this phase indicated that motivations, aspirations and barriers to employment change dramatically as women go through different 'stages' of motherhood when they need to manage decisions between work, career and family. In fact, factors such as the number and age of children, the length of time out of the workforce and changes in family circumstances – including caring for elderly parents or children with a disability – appear to have a larger impact on employment prospects for women than differences in their past professional experiences or educational attainment.
- 2.20** During the second wave, the peer researchers expressed a desire to examine further how women make choices about returning to work (or not returning to work) after having children. The peer researchers were concerned with attributing decisions about work to one factor, such as an individual's work/parenting orientation, as they thought it likely that women consider a range of factors when making decisions about work. The second wave was therefore focused around an activity that asked participants to outline all of the factors that drove their choices around work. The findings indicated that the participants were primarily driven by the particulars of their family situation but that their concerns for their family were much wider than typically assumed in the discourse surrounding mothers in the workforce. Although child-related concerns were clear priorities, other family factors appeared to be equally important, such as their partner's job situation (if applicable), responsibilities in the home aside from childcare, and caring for members of their extended family. Although many expressed personal desires related to returning to work, it was clear that these factors tended to receive the lowest priority in the decision-making process. Family circumstances and financial considerations held the highest priority for most mothers in the sample.
- 2.21** One clear theme that emerged from the second wave of the peer research was that most mothers struggle to maintain some influence or sense of control over their lives. During the second round of interviews, participants were asked to complete a 'sphere of influence' activity, based on the work of Stephen Covey. The major finding arising from the activity was that mothers often feel responsible for managing all of the competing responsibilities in a home and that, as a result, most struggle to maintain influence over the various aspects of their lives. This desire to remain in control also had an impact on their search for employment and their prospects. One participant said the activity helped her to realise why she

has chosen to pursue freelance work, while another participant who was long-term employed observed that her desire to maintain influence might have been preventing her from finding work:

'Maybe that is highlighting why I am not working. [Laughing] The control aspect is like, "I am not going to do that. I am not going to do it.'"

British/English, council tenant, aged 36–45, degree, single with two children ages 12 and 11

Reasons for returning to work

- 2.22** The most commonly reported reasons for deciding to return to work were: increasing pressure on family finances, wanting to stop claiming benefits and feeling a lack of stimulation caring for children full time. Mothers often gave more than one of these reasons for returning to work.

Financial motivations

- 2.23** Lone parents with few barriers to work and coupled mothers not comfortable on one income were often strongly motivated to return to work in order to increase their income. For example:

'I feel like we are counting the pennies. I am extremely controlled with money, so I know how to make it work with the little I have but I remember when I used to work, there was so much more I could save. And it's really, really bad to the point that I need to go back, to get some money. My son is getting older and the older they get, the more expensive it is.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 2.24** In addition to increasing household income, regaining financial independence was a key motivator for some mothers. This was a common motivator for respondents across both groups of coupled mothers.

- 2.25** More than half of the participants in the peer element also mentioned financial motivators for returning to work. Single mothers were more likely to describe financial pressure in terms of necessity, while many of the partnered participants discussed their return to work in terms of family financial stability. A handful of participants were motivated to return to work in order to bring in some 'extra' money which could be

spent on non-essential family expenses , such as holidays or personal items.

- 2.26** Within the main study, many lone parents claiming out of work benefits, such as Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support or Employment and Support Allowance, were likely to question the financial benefits of returning to work. For example, one mother currently on out of work benefits said:

'Well, I think it will be the same, because at the moment I'm on benefits. So I think that it's not going to be any worse off, or even any better. I think it will probably be just the same, though I don't know exactly.'

Lone parent with few barriers to work

- 2.27** In contrast, most of the lone parents on benefits in the peer element stressed that their benefits were insufficient for raising a family. These mothers talked about returning to work in order to provide a 'better life' for their children.

- 2.28** The high costs of childcare also affected mothers' views of the financial incentives to return to work. Mothers of pre-school aged children often felt that there was no financial penalty to caring for their children themselves because of the expense of childcare. For example:

'I think that financially, at the moment, I'm probably better off not working because the nurseries are expensive for a child who's under two. For the nursery at the moment we're paying £233 for him to go four days a month and that's the standard really for childcare, £60 to £70 a day... I don't think it's worth me working.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 2.29** Participants in the peer element emphasised that childcare was a particular barrier after having a second child, as the cost of putting multiple children in childcare is often prohibitive.

Other motivations

- 2.30** However, mothers were not solely driven by financial concerns. Other motivations included: the desire for stimulation of the work environment, the social interaction and status that came with being employed, no longer claiming benefits and setting a good example for their children.

These motivations to return to work closely matched the negative aspects of caring for children full time discussed above.

- 2.31** The low status of caring for children full time was a motivation for return not just for respondents' self-esteem, but also in terms of providing a positive role model for their children. For example:

'I don't think it gives them a good idea of a female role model, because I don't want my little boy going around saying "Daddy goes to work, Mummy sits at home." I think that's a terrible message because, you know, I fought hard in my career to get where I got and I don't want him thinking that I'm just someone who sometimes goes to Tesco and gets a loaf of bread.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 2.32** Some mothers on benefits were looking forward to no longer being a benefits claimant. For example:

'I don't like being on benefits. I wanted to come off benefits. I'd rather go to work. So I think if you're in that situation, you don't want to go back to being on benefits. You don't want to go back to being on Income Support.'

Lone parent with many barriers to work

- 2.33** The isolation and lack of stimulation that many mothers felt at home was also a significant motivating factor for a return to work. For example:

'I want to go back to work and get out of the house and meet new people and get dressed. Not thinking anymore that I'm going to be on my hands and knees with the kids all day and it doesn't really matter what I look like. Going to work will offer me stimulation. It would offer me time to read a newspaper on the tube, other people around you and a different level of conversation and using my mind in a different way.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 2.34** Participants in the peer element mentioned many of the same motivators, including acting as a role model for their children, getting off benefits and getting back to their 'old selves' by connecting with other adults and doing interesting, satisfying work outside the home. The desire to work

with other people was commonly mentioned as an important motivating force.

- 2.35** Many indicated that these motivators had changed significantly at different stages, although the stages affected participants in different ways. For example, some indicated feeling no desire to return to work after having their first child, while others were very motivated to return. Some felt that it was time to return to work once their children entered primary school, while others did not feel that was the right moment to return to work.

Work and childcare aspirations

- 2.36** Motherhood had affected the work preferences of many of the participants interviewed. This section discusses their preferences for work and childcare, and is based on interviews from the first wave of research.

Working pattern preferences

- 2.37** Some of the mothers interviewed were open to, or actively seeking full-time work. In some cases this was because of financial pressure. Typically these were coupled mothers not comfortable on one income and lone parents with few barriers to work in the typology. For example, a career PA said:

'Realistically, you know, working in a position full time, I say full time only because I know that if I do work part time, the money that I would be earning is not going to be sufficient to take care of all our outgoings, so that has to be full time.'

Lone parent with few barriers to work

- 2.38** Other participants who were happy to work full time were not primarily motivated by finances, but would consider full-time work if it offered other benefits, such as job status or a location close to home. For example, a participant who had a long career in journalism said:

'I wouldn't dismiss full time. If it was the right job full time, if it was perhaps a bit closer to home, then I would definitely consider it.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

2.39 However, in line with previous research²¹ most mothers that we spoke to wanted to return to work part time. This was true both of mothers who had experienced the stress of being a full-time worker and mother, and of those who had not. As discussed earlier, the women in our study tended to have a mix of work and parenting orientation and felt that part-time work would enable them to continue to provide care while also earning an income and, for some, continuing their careers. In practical terms, most of the coupled mothers that we spoke to shouldered a disproportionate burden of domestic tasks and this too led many mothers, both those in work or those seeking work, to aspire to part-time work. Similarly, one-third of the lone parent mothers we spoke to had sole responsibility for raising their children and without exception these mothers were seeking part-time work. For example:

'I think 16 to 30 hours a week would be fine, because when my little one is at school I don't mind me being at work. And I'm saying 30 hours, because now he's full time, he can go to the childcare after school. It won't be as much as when I had to pay for the full-time childcare.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

2.40 In contrast, during both phases of the peer study, many participants indicated that they would be happy to take on full-time employment. In fact, the full-time versus part-time distinction seemed to be less important than other factors. Participants indicated that, above all, they were looking for work that fulfilled three central requirements:

- First, participants emphasised the need for flexibility, so that they could cope with unanticipated emergencies.
- Second, participants wanted to find a position – part or full time – that had reasonable expectations in terms of hours, so that they could balance work and family responsibilities.

²¹ See, for example: J. Elliott et al. (2001), 'The influence of qualifications on women's work histories, employment status and earnings at age 33', *European Sociological Review*, Vol 17, No 2; F. Jaumotte (2003) *Female labour force participation: Past trends and main determinants in OECD countries*, OECD; J. Plunkett (2011) *The Missing Million: The Potential for Female Employment to Raise Living Standards in Low to Middle Income Britain*, Resolution Foundation

- Finally, participants stressed that they needed to find a position offering sufficient pay to both cover costs (such as childcare and transport) and make the time away from their children 'worthwhile'.

2.41 Despite having a strong preference for part-time and also flexible work, many mothers in the main study found that it was difficult to find good quality, well-paid jobs of this nature. Some mothers also felt that part-time jobs were poorly paid in comparison to full-time jobs, even for similar work. This is in line with other literature which suggests that the fall in earnings that women in Britain experienced after moving into part-time work was not entirely accounted for by their reduced hours, but also by a decrease in pay.²² For example:

'Lots of them seem to think because you're part time, they can get away with paying really low... if you were in that industry doing full time it would be a lot better paid even though they say it's pro rata salary.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

2.42 Others found that companies that seemed keen to employ them changed their minds when they expressed a wish for part-time hours. For example:

'I had a great chat with [international children's brand] who told me how family orientated they are and how much they appreciate families and blah, blah, blah and then when I said I want three days a week they went, 'there's the door, bye'. I was mortified.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

2.43 Some mothers' experiences of work before they had children made them feel that they could not return to the same role or industry part time. This was often the case for mothers who had held jobs that involved working long hours. For example, a mother who had worked as a senior executive in the publishing industry felt that:

'In my industry in particular the work doesn't lend itself to part time or flexible working. It's kind of all hours, really.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

²² I. La Valle, E. Clery and M. C. Huerta (2008) *Maternity rights and mothers' employment decisions*, Department for Work and Pensions

- 2.44** As a result, many mothers felt that they had to lower their work aspirations in order to find part-time or flexible work. This was the case both for mothers who had previously returned to work and those who had not. Some were explicit that they had prioritised family friendly roles over career opportunities. For example, a mother who had worked in a city law firm said:

'To be honest with you, I would trade job status for flexibility. So I think now I'd try and go for flexibility over anything else.'

Lone parent with few barriers to work

- 2.45** Many participants in the peer element also mentioned that it would not be possible for them to return to their former profession, given expectations of the industry. All of these women had high levels of qualifications and had worked in high-pressure private sector jobs before having children. Others, particularly those who had obtained their qualifications after having children, wanted to find a 'proper job' and begin their professional careers, rather than taking something part time or temporary. Regardless of educational background and family circumstance, one significant theme throughout the peer element was the desire to find a balance between interesting work and a reasonable work/life balance. One participant described this as looking for work with 'responsibility that I can control.' For some, this was part-time, flexible work. For others, it could be full-time, as long as there was no expectation to work unreasonable hours and sacrifice a substantial amount of evening and weekend time with their children.

Childcare preferences

- 2.46** Only a small minority of the women that we spoke to in the main study would not consider using any formal childcare. This is, perhaps, surprising given the relatively high levels of parenting orientation among the mothers interviewed. In line with other research,²³ negative attitudes towards formal childcare were a little more common among women with lower-level qualifications, typically these were lone parents with many barriers to work. Nonetheless, the more generally positive attitudes towards formal childcare (regardless of level of education) may be linked

²³ A. Bell, N. Finch, I. La Valle, R. Sainsbury and C. Skinner (2005) *A question of balance: lone parents, childcare and work*, Research Report 230: Department for Work and Pensions

to the fact that many of the mothers we spoke to did not live close to their families, often because they had moved to London to pursue a career. As a consequence, informal childcare was difficult, if not impossible, to arrange. One mother that we spoke to was explicit about this:

'The issue is when they are not in school. We don't have any family... you know, I cannot rely on friends to look after them. For one day, yes, but not for more.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

2.47 Interviews in the peer element probed the relationship between qualifications and perceptions of childcare. Within the peer sample, the women who expressed negative feelings about childcare had varying levels of educational attainment. However, all were single mothers on Housing Benefit. This indicates that negative perceptions of childcare may have something to do with the heightened sense of responsibility that tends to be felt by single parents. Concerns about the dangers that are present for children in particular communities in London are also likely to play a role in the formation of such perceptions of childcare.

2.48 Most mothers in the main study had used some formal childcare, even if they had been caring for their children full time. Mothers who had pre-school aged children had typically used nurseries and in a small number of cases, nannies. Mothers of school-aged children tended to prefer before and after-school clubs, although this was not always unproblematic. For example, a mother with three school-aged children said:

'If I go back to work, they could use the afterschool club at school then I could say you can do the drama club until 4.30 and then you go to afterschool club and then I can pick you up. But I'd have to find somebody that will potentially pick up other kids and then come back to school an hour later to pick up my kids. So, I would have to find like a childminder basically.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

2.49 Peer data confirmed the challenges of relying on afterschool clubs and nurseries with set hours, particularly for single parents. As one participant explained, it can be a particular challenge for lone parents on benefits to juggle expectations of employers and rigid childcare schedules:

'Because, when I finished work, I was always rushing to pick my daughter. And most of the time I was late. And I don't want to have an issue with social services... I don't want it look like I am an irresponsible mother.'

African, council tenant, degree, single with one child aged six

- 2.50** While many mothers in the main study were looking for part-time work but were happy to use some wrap-around childcare, some mothers would only consider work in school hours. This was confirmed during interviews with WLU staff who felt that a lack of flexibility around hours was a barrier to some clients' moving into work:

'I think mainly it's the hours, lots of women just want the term time or just want a 10 til two and that is a huge, huge barrier. I think some small employers do worry that there's a lack of flexibility out there with working mums, and there is a bit of that with some women: "Well I can't work till four o'clock. I can never work till four o'clock because I've got to pick up my child from school." Whereas I would like to say "Well if you show a bit of flexibility you'll get a bit of flexibility in return" so that is a barrier.'

Staff member, frontline delivery role

- 2.51** In the peer element, school hours emerged as one of the central factors influencing mothers' decisions around employment. Many indicated a willingness to use childcare outside school hours. However, the expense of private childcare and the inflexibility of school-based care, such as breakfast and afterschool clubs, made it impossible for some mothers – particularly lone parents – to consider any job requiring them to leave before 8:00 am or return after 6:00 pm.

Summary

- 2.52** While some of the mothers in the main study that we spoke to had chosen to leave work to care for their children, a striking finding was that, for many, this move out of work had been involuntary. Many of the mothers had been made redundant while pregnant or on maternity leave, lost jobs in the recession or returned to work but had been unable to balance this with looking after their child or children. A range of motivations for returning to work were reported. Some of these were financial, particularly for those mothers whose families were struggling on

one income, and lone parents with few barriers to work. Non-financial motivations included: providing a good role model to children, and regaining the stimulation and social interaction of work. Motherhood affected participants' attitudes toward work. While some mothers were looking for full-time work, most had a preference for part-time employment that would allow them to balance work and caring responsibilities, as well as maximise the financial gains from work. Many participants reported difficulty finding good quality part-time work, and some mothers lowered their work aspirations in order to find this.

3 Looking for work

Introduction

- 3.1** This chapter discusses the barriers mothers faced when looking for work across all three waves of interviews. It explores how these barriers were overcome by mothers who moved back into work and identifies the barriers of those that did not find work. Finally, this chapter examines what support has been successful in supporting mothers back into work.
- 3.2** As the peer element only included two intensive waves, the data in this chapter focuses primarily on the findings from the main study. However, peer findings have been included when data from the peer element further illuminates or offers a contrast to the central findings.
- 3.3** In the first wave of interviews mothers' barriers to work were explored. These were then revisited during subsequent interviews. The barriers to work that mothers faced were similar for most, although some had a more complex set to negotiate than others. This affected the likelihood of mothers moving into work over the course of the research and also the speed at which they did so. Mothers in this research can be divided into three broad groups on this basis. Those who:
- overcame barriers quickly – these mothers had moved into work by the second wave of research
 - took longer – this group of mothers had found work by the final wave of the research
 - had not moved into work by the final wave of research.

Barriers for mothers who had moved into work by the second wave of research

- 3.4** Unsurprisingly, mothers who had moved into work by the second wave of interviews had largely overcome their barriers to work. Many of the barriers discussed in the first wave of interviews had been overcome because of the specific nature of the work or role that they had moved into. For example, several mothers explained that they had overcome worries about transport because they had found work locally. However,

mothers had also proactively taken a range of measures to work around issues and concerns relating to employment. The three barriers that mothers had experienced (and – in the case of mothers who had moved into work – overcome) most frequently included:

- a lack of flexible and/or part-time work
- a lack of affordable and suitable childcare
- low confidence.

3.5 Concerns and barriers related to flexible and part-time working opportunities were common for participants and often felt by financially stretched coupled mothers, those described in typology 2. These participants typically felt pressure to work, but wanted work to fit around a caring role through flexibility and offering family-friendly working practices when needed. Finding flexible and/or part-time work was sometimes described as a difficult and drawn-out process, and one mother noted that persistence was vital in her overcoming this barrier. Many mothers we spoke to had widened their work search, increasing the number of roles they would consider. For many, this flexibility and pragmatism was a way of overcoming the barrier of a lack of flexible and/or part-time work.

3.6 Another common barrier identified by this group in the first wave of interviews was anxiety about finding suitable and affordable childcare. Previous research suggests that the availability and affordability of childcare are of concern to families, with several studies highlighting the low public subsidy and relative expense of childcare compared to other countries as a significant barrier for mothers returning to work in the UK.²⁴ In the second and third waves, mothers reported that they overcame this barrier by moving into flexible and/or part-time jobs. These jobs meant that they had little need for formal childcare as they were available to provide most of the care for their children themselves. Others had less need for childcare because their children had started school. One mother moved into full-time work and was subsequently able to pay for the childcare she needed.

²⁴ Ibid. See also, I. Mulheirn and R. Shorthouse (2011), *The Parent Trap: Illustrating the growing costs of childcare*, Social Market Foundation and J. Plunkett (2011) *The Missing Million: the potential for female employment to raise living standards in low to middle income Britain*, Resolution Foundation

- 3.7** Mothers described overcoming low confidence through a number of means, including support they had received from Women Like Us (WLU). For example, support that helped included attending workshops and one-to-one sessions with job coaches. Many also found that returning to work itself helped them to realise that they were competent and capable. For example, one mother felt she had tackled her low confidence by setting up a market stall. Overcoming a lack of confidence was a great relief for some mothers who felt this barrier had held them back in the past.

'You're kind of like nervous, and you think, oh, what are you going to do, you know, even using Outlook with the emails...that first week, "oh, panic, panic", and everything has changed so much, but then, you know, you're back in it and you know you can do it.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

Case study – overcoming low confidence through moving into work

Faye is in her late 30s and lives in South London with her two school-aged children and partner. Faye worked up until having her first child in 2004. She did a number of different jobs, including reception and administration work, but finally established an interest and career in managing web content for a large national media company. Whilst taking time out of work to care for her children, Faye decided she wanted to pursue a degree in social care. She needs to undertake an access course before applying to university however a lack of funding for places means she has put these plans on hold. In the meantime Faye decided to look for part-time work.

Initially she was reluctant to resume work, particularly the career she had before becoming a mother. Faye lacked confidence in her skills and abilities and felt they would be out of date. She found attending workshops run by WLU beneficial as they helped her realise that she did still have relevant skills. Faye decided to look for work and found a part-time role, through searching online. The job makes use of her web content-management skills.

Faye found once she moved into work she quickly overcame her lack of confidence and realised that her skills and abilities were still relevant and appreciated by employers. Moving back into the workplace was the main

driver of her overcoming her lack of confidence. Part-time working hours also allow her to continue to care for her children outside school hours.

- 3.8** Although confidence as a barrier to work was reported by all mothers in the first wave of research, those mothers who had successfully moved into work by the second wave had overcome their lack of confidence with a small amount of support. Others reported the move into work had helped them overcome this barrier after a year of job searching.

Barriers for mothers who had moved into work by the third wave of research

- 3.9** As discussed above almost all mothers who took part in the final wave of interviews had found work, or had worked at some point during the three waves of research. As well as the barriers outlined above, this group of mothers experienced further barriers relating to skills, qualifications and work experience. Mothers who described barriers relating to skills, qualifications and experience had little or no work experience in the UK and most had qualifications at level 2 or below. For some, a lack of English language skills added to these constraints.
- 3.10** The peer data also indicated that immigrant mothers face particular challenges, including a lack of networks and English language skills, and an inability to make connections between prior work experience (outside the UK) and current job opportunities.
- 3.11** In wave three of the main research some mothers had overcome these barriers, for example by moving into entry-level work or attending training courses to help them develop new skills. In one instance a mother who had not worked since moving to England had started an accountancy course and secured work experience one day per week with a local accountant. The accountancy firm had offered her a paid position working 20 hours per week. Her pay was due to increase from national minimum wage if she successfully completed her training.

'I started in March. It was work experience I just went to one accounting firm, and I ask for one day work experience, and they offer me this one day, but from September I've been doing four, yes... so, I'm quite happy.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 3.12** Another participant who had not worked in the UK after having children found work as result of a training course run by Jobcentre Plus. The training she received boosted her confidence and was a factor in her successfully securing a job in the retail sector.

Barriers for mothers who did not move into work

- 3.13** Only a very small number of mothers we spoke to had not worked when we interviewed them in wave three of the study. Some had conducted an intensive, though unsuccessful, work search while others had not done much to look for work. It was common for mothers who did not find work to have been out of work for five or more years (at the time of the first interview) and to live in social rented housing. Some mothers who did not find work had been out of the labour market for shorter periods. However, these mothers often had additional barriers to work, such as language constraints, immigration issues and children with health problems. Some mothers who were comfortable on one income had also not moved into work.

Available for work

- 3.14** The majority of mothers who had not worked but were looking for work were lone parents with many barriers to work. These mothers, who had been far from the labour market at the start of the study, had undertaken a range of training and skills development and were much closer to moving into work at the time of the final interview. For many of these mothers, their engagement in work search and work-related activity had been prompted by a move from Income Support to Jobseeker's Allowance. Many mothers had taken the opportunity to take 'back to work' courses and gain basic skills qualifications.

'I think that's what may have been holding me back, and that's why I started doing the courses that I had done, to gain more experience, especially in terms of admin.'

Lone parent with many barriers to work

- 3.15** This group of mothers continued to experience very low levels of confidence. One mother reported the prospect of moving into work frightening:

'Confidence-wise, it's, you know, like I say, it's scary going back in to work whether it's full time or part time,... you know you just

sort of go out with your friends and catch up on coffee and stuff like that, you're not actually in the workforce with, you know, with work colleagues on a day-to-day basis, so it's quite scary and daunting to do... you know, to go back into that.'

Lone parent with many barriers to work)

- 3.16** However, these mothers reported that taking part in courses and actively looking for work had increased their confidence, as some had felt that they could not get a job and had not considered working previously. Many had started or were looking for voluntary work in order to increase their confidence and further prepare them for moving into work. Several reported that they expected to move into work in the coming months.

'I think it was when I went to Dress for Success and when I was trying on the suits. Like, it gave me that more sense of pride feeling and I felt good. So, I think from having that interview as well has done a lot for me. So yes, yes, I'm not so low anymore.'

Lone parent with many barriers to work

- 3.17** Peer data confirmed the particular challenge of returning to work after a long period out of work. Participants indicated waning self-confidence in their own abilities, concerns about 'gaps' on CVs and the perception that their age would work against them in an interview setting.
- 3.18** Peer data also indicated that lack of confidence as a result of being out of the labour market was not restricted to parents without qualifications. In fact, a number of highly qualified, experienced participants who had worked in service industries indicated that they felt they could no longer compete against younger applicants in their industries. Many of these participants reported feeling disadvantaged by their lack of familiarity with technology and overwhelmed by rapid changes in their industry, in addition to feeling that younger candidates' willingness to work longer hours would be more attractive to employers. Some of these participants expressed a desire to change industries but indicated that their low self-confidence was making it difficult to 'repackage themselves' successfully when looking for new employment opportunities:

'Purely because I have been out of it for too long and I am too old really, I think... It's a tricky one, because it's kind of a young person's game in many respects... I think if you're going to go back into that sector, you've got to go back into the long hours,

the pressure on you to work... as if you weren't a parent. And there's lots of younger people coming up through that... I can do anything I want. I'm really lucky. I can. I can retrain. I've got that luxury to be able to do that. But I'm just here thinking, I don't know what I want to do. I have no idea what I would be good at!

White British, owner-occupied housing, degree, partnered with one child age five

3.19 Two participants in the peer element who had not managed to find work indicated that childcare was also a challenge for the job application process itself. One was a single mother, while the other was partnered with two pre-school aged children. Both indicated that changes to the childcare element of tax credits had caused difficulties for them, as they could not afford childcare but needed to access it in order to find time to look for work.

3.20 A number of participants in the peer study expressed a perception that they were not getting jobs specifically because they were mothers looking for part-time employment. Two participants said they would no longer mention being a mother during an interview, because they felt it would result in their not being hired:

'I suppose I'd almost feel as though, I wouldn't talk about having children at all actually if I was going for a job, which is pretty awful really, but I wouldn't want to emphasise it at all.'

British, owner-occupied housing, A levels, partnered with two children ages nine and seven

Case study – available for work

Anita is in her in her mid 40s and lives in North London with her husband and three school-aged children. He husband is the sole earner and works in the creative industry. Anita has not worked since having her first child. Before becoming a mother she held various jobs, mainly part-time administrative roles, to supplement her career as a musician.

Although Anita can see the benefits of working, mainly for the family finances, she does not think they outweigh the benefits of being at home for her children. Anita feels strongly about being at home for her children:

'Definitely up to the age of seven or eight, I think they really need a parent there at 3.30 or as soon as possible. And once they start secondary school, I think it's quite hard to just leave them to come home to an empty house at 4 o'clock. So they're still quite young at 11 so I

think that maybe it gets a bit easier once they're about 12 and they've got used to coming home from secondary school.'

Because family finances are tight, Anita is searching for part-time work that would fit around her caring responsibilities. Over three years Anita honed in on a specific type of work which would combine her interest in music and her administrative experience working as a personal assistant. However, after conducting extensive job searches around this type of work, she found it to be not very family friendly as the studios and music venues, where this type of work was based, expected employees to work weekends. As a parent she feels she cannot sacrifice this time with her children.

During the last wave of fieldwork Anita decided she wanted to broaden her job search and had started investigating work in a local school. She volunteers at a school to build up her experience. Although she completed a number of applications, she is yet to secure work.

Not available for work

3.21 There were a very small number of mothers who were not working and not looking for work. Many of these mothers had children with health conditions or were caring for other family members, such as parents. Data from the peer element also highlighted the particular challenges facing mothers of children with special needs. In the main study, some mothers who were not looking for work had partners who earned enough to provide a comfortable household income. A small number of mothers who were not in work at the end of the study had had another baby, or were expecting a child, although many of these mothers had worked at some point during the study.

3.22 Many mothers who were not looking for work were engaged in meaningful activities in their communities, such as being school governors and holding other volunteer posts. Some were also pursuing personal interests such as photography. Although some mothers felt that they should look for work, they reasoned that their commitments and responsibilities did not allow for this.

How mothers found work

3.23 Coupled mothers and lone parents close to the labour market were most likely to have had an established career before becoming a mother. It was

common for these mothers to have found their job through former colleagues. For some, using professional networks and contacts seemed to be the most logical and potentially successful way of finding work, especially if they were seeking a return to a similar position or industry to the one they had worked in previously. Many of these mothers had actively stayed in touch with professional networks and contacts, and made it clear that they were looking for vacancies. For example, one mother explained how she regularly phoned old work colleagues in the hope that an opportunity would present itself. For others, however, it was a surprise that they had gained employment in this way. One mother stated that she felt that she had wasted her time seeking work through more formal channels like the internet. She described how WLU had encouraged her to consider using networks in her search for employment.

'It's a waste of time isn't it [looking on the internet]? It's you and a million other people. I do remember from one of the workshops I went on with WLU, and they were emphasising, how and where have you found all of your previous jobs? And you suddenly realise that it was through contacts.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 3.24** Finding work through friends or other contacts was equally likely, and an opportunity very often arose unexpectedly. Unplanned opportunities arose when mothers encountered a friend or acquaintance that they had not seen for a long period of time. The jobs mothers accepted were a mixture of those that suitable and those that did not fit with their previous experience and/or interests. Where the opportunity was well aligned, mothers had often been actively networking, staying in touch with old colleagues and pursuing suitable opportunities themselves.

Case study – found work through network

Isobel is in her late 30s and lives with her young daughter and husband in South London. Before becoming a mother Isobel worked full time as an account manager in the media sector. The job involved long hours which is something she felt she could not commit to after having a child. Isobel cared for her daughter full time for just over two years before she decided she wanted to find work again. However, she wanted to find work on a part-time basis. Initially Isobel made contact with a few recruitment agencies but found them reluctant to support her in finding the part-time hours in the sector she had worked in previously:

'I registered with probably about six or seven recruitment consultants. Of those, a couple almost kind of laughed at me when I said, you know, I want to go back to work, I'm a working mum, I'd be looking to do a slightly reduced week, if possible, you know, and there was like a, you know, a little sort of snort, like you're having a laugh, in the kind of work I do.'

As a result of this negative response Isobel decided to take other actions to look for work, and as part of this she informed former colleagues that she was looking for a job. From this networking, one of her previous managers contacted her with an opportunity to be part of a start-up company. The role suits her needs as it allows her to work part of the time from home, and involves a significant pay rise and promotion from the job she was doing before becoming a mother. Another draw of working with someone she knows is the fact that her employer understands she has childcare commitments, and this reassures her that they will be understanding and flexible when necessary.

Isobel had secured this job by the second wave of the research. By the third wave she had been promoted and hired junior staff.

- 3.25** Half of the participants in the peer element also indicated that they had found work through a former colleague, friend or family member. Only three said they had succeeded through an online search. However, those still looking for work within the peer sample indicated that they were relying substantially on online searches or public services, such as Jobcentre Plus.
- 3.26** The finding that many participants in the main study found jobs through their networks rather than through responding to advertisements or through recruitment agencies is not unexpected. The most recent figures from the Labour Force Survey revealed that just 28 per cent of those who started a job in the past three months found this job through replying to an advertisement and nine per cent found their job through a recruitment agency.²⁵ Whilst this implies a growth in informal networks as a route to source employment, it also suggests a lack of formally advertised quality part-time and flexible roles, which may disincentivise women with children from using mainstream recruitment agencies.

²⁵ Labour Force Survey, October – December 2012, Office for National Statistics

Employment support

3.27 Across the three waves of research, mothers were asked what support they would have liked to help them move into work and for those that found work, what support helped them find work. This section highlights what support helped mothers into work, as well as what would have helped those who did not move into the type of work they hoped for or any work at all.

Overcoming low confidence

3.28 Low confidence was cited by most mothers in this study as a significant barrier to work. It was also a barrier that most mothers had overcome, or gone some way to overcoming by the final wave of research. The support used to overcome low confidence included:

- participating in workshops at WLU, where mothers were able to meet others in similar situations and think about concrete steps to move back into work
- undertaking voluntary work to refresh skills, get into a working routine and increase self-esteem.

Support to find good quality part-time jobs

3.29 As discussed in chapter two and paragraph 3.3, many mothers widened their job search or downgraded their aspirations in order to find part-time or flexible work. This downgrading was successful for many mothers, although a greater pipeline of good quality part-time jobs and support to find these jobs may have enabled more mothers to move into work that allowed them to balance their work and caring responsibilities without downgrading their aspirations.

Availability of flexible formal childcare

3.30 Most mothers we spoke to were not able to use informal childcare. For lone parents in particular, a lack of formal childcare outside the hours of 8am and 6pm, or at different times depending on changing shift patterns was a constraint to work. The shortage of this type of childcare has been

identified elsewhere.²⁶ Increasing the availability of flexible childcare, and signposting parents to this where it does exist, would help mothers to widen their employment options and particularly support lone mothers by optimising the hours within which they can work.

Encouragement to use networks to find vacancies

- 3.31** Most mothers who moved into work found their jobs through their networks, whether through former colleagues, friends or family members. A small number of mothers recalled that they had been advised by WLU to use their networks. More commonly, participants were surprised that this was how they had found their job. Encouragement to make use of personal and professional networks may help women returners move into work more quickly, as some participants reported 'wasting' time making formal applications before using their networks.

Overcoming skills gaps

- 3.32** The most disadvantaged mothers in this study often had poor levels of basic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, and in some cases, limited English language. By the final wave of this study, many of these mothers had been offered basic skills and English language training through Jobcentre Plus. In some cases this enabled participants to move into work, while in other cases it raised their confidence and moved them closer to work, such as into volunteer positions.

Where does this support come from?

- 3.33** Many lone parents, particularly those with the most barriers to work who were receiving Jobseeker's Allowance, were accessing support through Jobcentre Plus. This included access to training courses and volunteering work within sectors the mothers were aiming to move into. There were other participants who had not moved into work, mainly those claiming Income Support or being supported by their partners, who did not have access to this – or any – type of support. Although not all of this group of mothers were particularly work orientated, they could also benefit from assistance in finding a course or volunteer work. This in turn might help to build their confidence or provide them with a clearer route into work which they could fit alongside caring for their children.

²⁶ R. Singler (2011) *Open all hours: flexible childcare in the 24/7 era*, Daycare Trust

- 3.34** Because of the nature of our sample, many participants reported receiving employment support from WLU at the first wave interview. This included workshops to build confidence, and advice to network and let former colleagues know that they were looking for work.
- 3.35** Since the beginning of this project, employment support for lone parents claiming out of work benefits has been incorporated into mainstream programmes in an effort to expand provision, for example through the Work Programme, although this does not always meet mothers' needs.²⁷ Employment support for mothers not in this situation is even more limited and, because of reductions in public spending since the start of this project, has contracted. This has had a particular impact on regional provision through the reduction in funding for regional development agencies and initiatives such as the Working Neighbourhoods programme.

Interventions that support mothers

- 3.36** Throughout the research, mothers reflected upon interventions that were most useful in helping them move into work. Comments on specific interventions were limited, indicating a lack of targeted support for this group.
- 3.37** As outlined above, women in the study mainly accessed interventions through Jobcentre Plus and WLU. Some had found courses or seminars through local authorities, and others through public services they accessed, such as children's centres. Some mothers had carefully considered the value of private coaching and the associated costs but had made the decision that it was not worth it.
- 3.38** Overwhelmingly, it seemed to be the case that mothers had not used other services similar to those provided by WLU or were not aware that other similar organisations existed. Mothers expressed a lack of opportunity to access services that could help them move into employment, and in many cases, they did not know where to look or who to turn to for support.
- 3.39** When comparing the services available to mothers, WLU was seen as offering a more comprehensive and personalised package for mothers. WLU offered a range of support and services including: a series of

²⁷ A. Whitworth (2013) *Tailor-made? Single parents' experiences of employment support from Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme*, Gingerbread

workshops, each with a different focus; and one-to-one coaching and support. In comparison, the support offered by Jobcentre Plus was not seen as being understanding or responsive to their needs as mothers (and sometimes as lone parents). Other research has found that lone parent jobseekers, and in particular those with higher levels of qualification, find support offered through Jobcentre Plus less helpful than other groups.²⁸

- 3.40** It is possible that interventions that include both group and one-to-one support may be helpful in aiding mothers in their work search. However, what is more important is that the content of interventions is tailored to the needs of the target group. An outline of how services were delivered by WLU follows as an example of what interventions targeted at mothers may need to include. These services were all said to be useful in boosting confidence, encouraging networking and improving practical skills, which were identified as key to aiding mothers in their work search.

Workshops

- 3.41** In general, service users found workshops offered by WLU very useful as they took people through both the practical and emotional steps that needed to be taken to prepare for and move into work. There was a general feeling that the workshops were designed distinctly to address the issues that mothers with young families face. For example, helping mothers to combat their concerns about not feeling confident enough to return to the workplace.
- 3.42** Overwhelmingly, the key benefit from the workshop experience was that mothers were given an opportunity to meet other, and sometimes quite different, women who were in a similar situation to them. Mothers explained that the workshop setting gave them an opportunity to get to know other mothers struggling with moving back to work, and found it comforting to know that they were not alone in these efforts.
- 3.43** An additional benefit of the workshops was that mothers were able to be away from a domestic setting for a designated three-hour slot. Mothers felt that this time was preparing them for the workplace, and they liked the formality of the sessions.

²⁸ N. Coleman and L. Lanceley (2011) *Lone Parent Obligations: supporting the journey into work*, Research Report 736, Department for Work and Pensions

The more practical workshops had a lot of support from service users, with one mother describing the CV workshop as the most useful activity that she undertook with WLU. Mothers explained that these workshops gave them the tools to apply for jobs and write good covering letters and CVs, and updated the knowledge they already had in these areas.

One-to-one coaching sessions

- 3.44** The one-to-one coaching sessions were seen by the service users as very beneficial. Mothers saw these sessions as building on the work that was undertaken in the workshops, and as an opportunity to access targeted help and support specific to their individual situations. There were instances described where advisers had helped their clients to look for specific jobs, and had gone to such lengths as enquiring about jobs on their behalf. Advisers in these roles were seen as being very supportive in helping individuals to think about what they wanted to do and focus their energies in the right places.
- 3.45** One-to-one sessions that helped mothers look over individual CVs and job applications were seen as particularly constructive and useful. Mothers reported that these sessions helped to solidify the knowledge acquired in the workshop sessions by putting it into practice. Doing this in an environment where individualised support and encouragement was offered helped raise the mothers' confidence levels and had the effect of making the processes less daunting.

Access to quality part-time jobs

- 3.46** A high proportion of mothers wanted to find part-time and flexible work and so being able to access advice from WLU specifically on how approach employers about flexible work and negotiate conversations at interview stage were seen to be highly valuable. Mothers were also attracted to WLU because of its jobs board (now branded Timewise Jobs) which specialises in advertising higher quality part-time and flexible roles. This was seen as a critical part of the WLU offer.
- 3.47** Overall, there were very high levels of interest in WLU services. Mothers were generally very happy with the coaching offer and felt that they were being catered for in a unique way. The majority felt that attending the workshops highlighted their barriers as a group of women with children, and helped them to explore ways of overcoming these barriers. It was also noted that attendees were given support in improving some of the

key hard and soft skills needed to find, apply for and move into employment. WLU was perceived as being up to date and current in its knowledge of local labour markets, and the advice that it offered. This was seen to be a particular strength of the organisation, particularly for mothers who had spent a significant length of time out of the labour market. For example:

'I think going to WLU helps you look at things from a different perspective, you know, and it also gives you an update, because when you've been out of work for a while, you know, they have everything that is current. And sometimes you do forget how to actually perform in an interview, or how to update your CV after having had a career break, and those things are really helpful.'

White other, owner-occupied housing, level 6 qualifications

3.48 The services offered by WLU are an illustration of what interventions targeted at mothers would need to focus on. These services appeared to be successful because they gave mothers a focus by exploring what they wanted to achieve and setting targets. Services that helped equip mothers with some of the practical skills needed to move into work, for example, modifying and updating CVs were also seen as essential. Additionally, mothers saw the value in interventions that helped them to think about what they wanted to do, and what sorts of jobs and commitments might work for them and their families. Further to this, considerable emphasis was placed on raising confidence levels, and helping women to see what they are capable of. This was said to be a key strength of a service offer, as it helped mothers to address a barrier that could at times appear overwhelming.

Summary

3.49 Despite their wide range of backgrounds and experiences, most of the mothers we spoke to shared a common set of barriers to work. These were: low confidence, concern that there was a lack of part-time and/or flexible work available and concern that childcare was unavailable or unaffordable. In addition to these barriers, a small group of participants – usually lone parents with many barriers to work – had low or no qualifications, and a lack of work experience and English language skills.

3.50 Encouragingly, almost all mothers we tracked throughout the three waves of research moved into work or made progress towards doing so. Of

those who entered employment, most found work through social and professional networks rather than replying to advertisements or engaging recruitment agencies. However what is clear that it can take one to two years for many mothers to find work following a period of time at home caring for children, because of the complex set of barriers they need to overcome and the particular constraints they experience in relation to childcare costs and preferred working hours.

- 3.51** Only a small proportion of mothers did not move into work. The majority of these mothers were far from the labour market at the start of the study, and were very close to moving into work at the end of the three waves after having engaged in training and skills development. A lack of networks in relevant professional areas appeared to be a significant entrenched barrier preventing these women from accessing opportunities. Only a tiny proportion of mothers were not looking for work, usually because they were caring for children or family members with health conditions.
- 3.52** The next chapter examines mothers' experiences in work.

4 Experiences in work

- 4.1** By the third wave of research approximately three quarters of mothers had moved into work or had worked in the preceding year. This was an increase from roughly half of mothers who were in work in the first wave, and about two-thirds of mothers who were in work when we spoke to them in the second wave. Only a small handful of mothers had not worked at all, and the majority of these had engaged in training or education.
- 4.2** The mothers we spoke to in the third wave had moved into a wide range of jobs. These were primarily part time and although full-time work was less prevalent, many mothers who were in work saw this as a long term goal. To a large extent, mothers had found jobs in industries they had worked in previously; however, many were in downgraded positions. Only a small number of mothers who were in work or had worked, were doing a job at a more senior level to their pre-motherhood work. This chapter considers the types of work mothers moved into, how mothers balanced work and family life, and the conditions under which some mothers did not move into work.
- 4.3** As the peer element did not utilise the typology of mothers, the aggregate data in this section does not include data from the peer element. Instead, peer findings are included at the end of each section, in order to further elaborate the main results.

Who moved into work?

- 4.4** Mothers across all typologies moved into a variety of different jobs across all sectors and at different levels. Lone parents with many barriers to work were least likely to have been in work in the third wave of research. However, these mothers had moved much closer to the labour market since the first interview.
- 4.5** Although mothers across all typologies worked part time, this was most common among lone parents, who needed to combine work with caring responsibilities without the additional support of a partner in the home. Coupled mothers were slightly more likely to move into full-time work, although the majority were working part time. Those whose families were

not comfortable on a single income were likely to move into part-time work and share caring responsibilities with their partners.

- 4.6** We observed a slight variance across the mother typologies with regards to the type of employment that mothers had moved into. A more detailed outline of participants' experiences by typology is provided below.

Mother 1 – Lone parent with many barriers to work

- 4.7** There were very few cases of lone parents with many barriers to work moving into work. However, the work these mothers did move into was at a very low level, requiring no or little previous work experience. Jobs were primarily part time and poorly paid with little scope for flexibility or progression. These included: cleaner, childminder and dance tutor. Mothers in this group felt that they could not find better paid or more interesting work because of their lack of work experience. They often also had concerns about changing jobs and the impact of this on tax credits, Housing and Council Tax Benefits. Despite this, these mothers were able to balance work and parenting duties, as their jobs were close to home and part-time hours enabled them to spend enough time with their children.

Mother 2 – Coupled mother not comfortable on one income

- 4.8** These mothers typically moved into mid-level positions, often utilising skills and experience gained before becoming a mother. These mothers were often working part time in positions that had some degree of responsibility similar to or slightly below their pre-motherhood work level. The roles they moved into included: HR administrator, office manager, project manager, press officer, recruitment consultant, information officer and writer.
- 4.9** The mothers in this group reported that they had often moved into roles that were quite flexible, for example they were given the opportunity to change days, work around childcare arrangements or have school holidays off. These mothers were motivated to work in order to ease 'stretched' family budgets and were particularly happy to work part-time hours that minimised childcare costs. Part-time hours and flexibility were also important to these mothers as they wanted to provide care for their children. The partners of these mothers were typically working full time. There were instances in this group of mothers progressing by moving

from temporary to permanent contracts and increasing hours, which was potentially related to the skills and competencies that these mothers demonstrated once they were in work. However, there were some concerns amongst this group that their jobs did not offer enough opportunity for pay rises and promotions. Some of these mothers were looking to increase their hours or move into better paid work in the future when their children were older.

Mother 3 – Coupled mothers comfortable on single a income

- 4.10** These mothers typically moved into a mid-to-high level role, often with a high level of responsibility. Jobs that these mothers moved into included roles in marketing and publishing. For example, one mother took a job as a director of client services for a large private organisation. These mothers also were likely to take freelance and contract roles. Salaries for this group were often around £25,000 per year but with some much higher, including one mother with a salary of £70,000. It was much more likely for this group to be in full-time employment than any of the other mother typologies. They also had experience of taking on high-level contract work or freelancing opportunities, which was not as common across other groups.
- 4.11** These mothers had moved into work that utilised their previous experience and high-level skills, almost all of these mothers had qualifications at degree level or above. Without the financial pressure faced by other groups in this study, these mothers had the freedom to choose which jobs they would consider and could move into a job that was right for them. These mothers tended to be more ambitious about their work than those in other groups. Part-time hours were less important to them than a job that used their skills and experience and paid well. Some of these mothers were able to seek less mainstream employment options including self-employment.

Mother 4 – Lone parent with few barriers to work

- 4.12** These mothers were most likely to have moved into low-to-mid level employment, including positions in retail, administration and general office work, although there were a few examples of mothers moving into higher level positions. This group was most likely to have downgraded. The financial pressure of being a lone parent and the pressure of the

Jobseeker's Allowance regime meant that this group was less able to find work that entirely matched their experience and aspirations. Low pay was common in the jobs that these mothers took, with many taking positions paid at around £20,000 full time equivalent or below. Low pay and lack of progression were noted by these mothers as particularly negative characteristics of their work. For example, one mother who worked an air steward said:

'It's £12,000 basic and only £2.16 an hour once you [clock] in and that builds up... so, I don't know... I'll give it a go because I desperately need to get out and work.'

Lone parent with few barriers to work

- 4.13** Within the peer sample, eight of the original 20 participants informed us that they had moved into work by the end of the project. Of these eight, three were already working at the time of the first interview. Those who did manage to move into work during the project mostly found part-time flexible work in their area of interest. Two did freelance work on an unpaid basis at the beginning of the project but had moved into paid freelance employment by the end of the study.
- 4.14** However, one major finding of the peer element was the difficulty of classifying whether or not participants had 'moved into work'. Many women fell between the cracks of the traditional typology of employment, suggesting that it would be instructive to find a way to capture the experiences of mothers who had taken concrete steps towards employment (such as taking on a volunteer position in their industry or starting the process to establish a business) but would not yet be considered 'in work' because of a lack of a regular, salaried position.
- 4.15** While most respondents in the main study had moved into work by the final wave of research, only some had moved into work that met their needs and aspirations. The following section considers the experiences of those who had moved into work that met these needs and those who had not.

Moving into a good job

- 4.16** For the purposes of the report, a 'good job' is characterised as a position that is equal to or an improvement upon participants' pre-motherhood employment in relation to job title, salary, contract type or working hours.

This definition also takes into consideration how mothers felt about their jobs, and their own definitions of 'good' work. Their definitions incorporated flexibility, level of responsibility, working environment, skills development and support from employers.

- 4.17** In wave three some mothers had moved into similar work, or work with similar levels of responsibility and pay to their pre-motherhood work, in line with the findings from previous waves. This occurred across all typologies. A small number of women had taken up self employment as a way of continuing to work at a similar level to their pre-motherhood jobs.
- 4.18** Some mothers reported slight changes in their roles, for example, moving from the public to the private sector, in order to maintain a level of responsibility and pay similar to their pre-motherhood roles.

Upgrading and progressing

- 4.19** It was uncommon for mothers in this study to move into positions that were an improvement upon their pre-motherhood work. However, there were a few examples of mothers gaining employment that could be considered an improvement on roles that they had held previously. This was because they had moved into a higher level role, or in some cases taken on a higher level of responsibility in an existing role; for example, they were now managing a member of staff, which they had not done before. Quite a few of these mothers had been in entry-level positions before becoming a mother.
- 4.20** The majority of mothers had been back in work for a year or less in wave 3, and some had changed jobs at least once over the course of the study. For many, progression was a long-term aspiration. However, a few mothers had progressed since the second wave. This included moving to the next level up, increasing their salary or taking on more hours and responsibilities. Progression appeared to come with sacrifices, such as less time with family and less flexibility.

'I work some long hours now so I find the work/life balance isn't how I'd like it to be, you know, it might be well paid but as a result I'll probably find myself working two, if not three nights a week after she's gone to bed I'll be working from probably eight till ten to catch up with stuff.'

Coupled mother, comfortable on one income

- 4.21** A very small number of mothers who had been on temporary or zero-hours contracts in previous years now had permanent contracts with the same employers. These mothers stated that transitioning to a permanent position made them feel more confident and proactive in the workplace.

'I think [what's] very positive is that there was place in job market and you get more confident about putting yourself forward and talk to other people.'

Coupled mother, comfortable on one income

Financial gain

- 4.22** As discussed in Chapter two, for many mothers, the move into work was prompted by financial need. Mothers who moved into 'good' work commonly reported an increase in household income. This meant they were able to afford things that they had been unable to previously, such as holidays, new clothing and items for their children.

'A feeling of relief that really I can do something and earn money and see that I'm bringing something back home, yes. And be able to do something for the kids, buy what they want, you know, plan myself ahead to give them a better life. It's really that kind of feeling.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 4.23** Some lone parent and coupled families that had struggled financially before the mothers moved into work explained how the additional income from working had enabled them to pay off debts and overdrafts, and regain control over their finances. Some mothers also reported that they were able to start saving. Mothers in these circumstances reported reduced stress.
- 4.24** Mothers across typologies also spoke about the financial independence they had gained from working. This was common for coupled mothers, those comfortable on one income in particular, who may have been in high paid employment before motherhood, and had subsequently become reliant on their partner for money.
- 4.25** Mothers who had previously received Jobseeker's Allowance reported leaving the regime as a positive impact of working. Working, for these mothers, had improved finances and had also decreased their

dependence on what they considered to be an undesirable benefits regime. Other research suggests that a dislike of claiming Jobseeker's Allowance has the capacity to push lone parents into work quickly,²⁹ and it is likely that this was the case for some of the mothers in this study. A very small proportion of mothers had increased their hours in order to reach the threshold for claiming tax credits.

Job satisfaction

- 4.26** Across the study, mothers reported the importance of having a separate identity as a working person. These mothers stated that doing engaging and stimulating work allowed them to have a more balanced and well rounded lifestyle. For many mothers, a good job meant achieving a balance that suited the needs of their families but also fulfilled their personal needs and ambitions. This included staying in their profession and having a job that was mentally stimulating, but also having quality time at home. For example:

'I just want a nice job that, you know, keeps me challenged. I get paid for it, but then I come home and this is where my real job is, at home.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 4.27** Many mothers were able to maintain 'challenging' jobs that required them to take on a range of responsibilities, while still managing their home lives. Mothers achieved this in a number of ways, including working freelance, becoming self employed, negotiating home working days or working flexible hours. This was more achievable for coupled mothers, who relied on their partner's support, but was also possible for lone parents who were able to negotiate with their employers.

'I feel that work sort of appreciates my lifestyle as well...they sort of understand that I am a working mum and stuff and I get flexitime, but they are quite flexible with me, if I need to come in late on certain days.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

²⁹ P. Lane, J. Casebourne, L. Lanceley and M. Davies (2011) *Lone Parent Obligations: Work, childcare and the Jobseeker's Allowance regime*, Research Report 782, Department for Work and Pensions

'Working freelance as a graphic designer, it's quite good. I can work from home, and I can do chunks of work when she's asleep, or if I just book someone for the morning. And so, it was never, like, the whole day, it was always bits and pieces, but that worked well for me.'

Coupled mother, comfortable on one income

- 4.28** Most participants in the peer element who had moved into work were also positive about their new positions. Three of the eight said they really enjoyed the work, and two thought their new positions would be helpful for their career advancement. Three said they were happier than they had been in their former positions.

Improved skills

- 4.29** A small number of mothers in the main study had completed training before or in addition to moving into work. For some of these mothers, the training they had undertaken facilitated their move into employment or progression. This was particularly the case for mothers who moved into a new field. Mothers who had undertaken training were positive about the opportunity to improve their skills or learn new skills. However, for the majority of these mothers, training appeared to be a means of obtaining employment or a particular job role, and in-work training beyond this was rarely mentioned.

Moving into a lower quality job

- 4.30** As opposed to the working conditions described above, many mothers experienced downgrading or unfavourable working conditions. This seemed to be closely linked to the choices that mothers made in relation to their own needs and those of their families, and the pressure that they were under to find work quickly. In addition to this, some mothers felt that they had experienced a loss in earning potential because of time spent away from an industry, or – in some cases – as a result of the recession.

Downgrading

- 4.31** Although our research suggests that some mothers can retain pre-motherhood levels of pay and responsibility, many of the mothers who returned to work experienced occupational downgrading. It is likely that

this is in part owing to the high incidence of moving into part-time work. Part-time work in the UK has historically been poorly paid with lower levels of responsibility compared to full-time work.³⁰ Recent research has shown that few part-time vacancies have salaries above £20,000 per annum pro rata.³¹ Occupational downgrading refers to work that is at a lower level of pro rata pay, skill or responsibility than pre-motherhood work. However, some mothers who took downgraded part-time positions saw this as the most practical option that allowed them to stay in or aligned to their pre-motherhood profession, as well as managing family life.

- 4.32** Coupled mothers not comfortable on one income and lone parents with few barriers to work were most likely to experience 'forced' downgrading. This was likely to be because of financial pressure to find a job quickly and, in the case of lone parents because of the pressure of the Jobseeker's Allowance regime. Lone parents in particular often needed to find employment that was flexible, part time and convenient, and this often resulted in their accepting or looking for positions that were of a significantly lower level than jobs they had in the past.

It's hideous and I'm ludicrously overqualified for it, and it's the dullest thing I have ever done in my entire life.'

Lone parent with few barriers to work

- 4.33** The degree of downgrading varied significantly. Some mothers found jobs that paid slightly less than their pre-motherhood work or had a small reduction in responsibility. Others, particularly lone parents with few barriers to work, had degree level qualifications and good work histories but were working in minimum wage routine occupations. For some mothers, the experience of downgrading was negative and they were unhappy about being over-qualified and under-utilised in their roles. These mothers wanted to find employment that offered a higher level of job-satisfaction in the future. Many participants in the peer element stressed their desire to find work that would allow them to use their skills 'at [their] level', rather than having to accept work with limited

³⁰ G. Paull (2006) 'The Impact of Children on Women's Paid Work', *Fiscal Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4; V. Alakeson (2012) *The price of motherhood: women and part-time work*, Resolution Foundation

³¹ E. Stewart (2012) *Building a sustainable quality part-time recruitment market*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

responsibilities and/or work that would not use their experience or qualifications.

- 4.34** In the main sample, it was, however, more common for mothers who experienced downgrading to be relatively satisfied. Reasons for this included lower levels of stress and responsibility and easier tasks at work. Many of the coupled mothers who were financially squeezed had high parenting orientation and wanted to continue to carry out a large amount of childcare themselves. These mothers were satisfied by finding a job that brought in just enough money and caused minimal stress. This was also the case for some coupled mothers who were comfortable on one income as these mothers were more likely to downgrade by choice, rather than out of necessity. For example, one mother who had worked as a solicitor before motherhood and now worked part time for a local community organisation, and said:

'There was no sort of office or power dressing, staff body or anything like that, you know; everyone was sort of there in their jeans... I feel positive; I've done something constructive; I am not being stuck in the house. So when I do go to pick [the children] up, you know, I'm generally a little bit more focused on them because I've been busy doing something else and it's nice.'

Coupled mother, comfortable on one income

- 4.35** Some participants in the peer element shared these attitudes, indicating that they explicitly did not want to return to a high-stress job that would prevent them being physically and emotionally 'present' for their children:

'Certainly when she was very young, I realised that I just couldn't – or I could but I didn't want to – direct, just because the hours involved are just completely incompatible with any kind of family life. And it's not just the hours. I mean, even if I was there in the house, I know a part of me would be not there, you know, so I wouldn't be fully ... I wouldn't be present'

White British, privately rented housing, post-graduate degree, partnered with one child age six

- 4.36** Lone parents with few barriers to work in the main sample were mostly looking for employment that drew on their skills and experience. Work needed to fit around parenting responsibilities. These mothers often recognised that there had been a significant shift in their employment status. They demonstrated that they had redefined work in their own

minds, and were accepting of the fact that they had often moved from a 'career role' to a 'convenient job'. For example:

'It's very different to jobs that I've done previously... they've been really responsible jobs. They've been highly paid, so, of course the level of expectation for you is much higher, and you can't really just run out the door at exactly when your time's finished... whereas with this, the beauty of it is just what it says on the tin, and nobody expects you to do any more really.'

Lone parent with few barriers to work

Marginalisation of part-time workers

- 4.37** Data from the peer element indicated that working conditions can push mothers out of employment. For example, one participant in the peer study managed to find a flexible, part-time job related to her field. However, the organisation where she worked did nothing to integrate her into the overall team, so she constantly felt behind and disconnected. The negative impact of this experience on her confidence and self-esteem ultimately resulted in her leaving the job.

Seeking satisfaction through other channels

- 4.38** One striking finding of the peer element was the amount of volunteering pursued by the participants. Of the 13 participants involved in the second wave of peer research, 10 were holding down significant volunteering responsibilities, including leadership roles at their children's schools, volunteering with registered charities in the area, and volunteering with public services, such as the council. Two actually mentioned that they run volunteer organisations in addition to their other family and work responsibilities. However, despite these impressive achievements, most of the participants did not consider these responsibilities to be relevant for the topic of the research. This suggests that mothers play down their volunteer responsibilities, both in terms of the importance of such positions for their communities and in terms of their experience and skills for future employment. It is also possible that mothers may be taking on interesting volunteer positions to fulfil their personal drives and ambitions while pursuing part-time, less satisfying paid work that fits around family commitments.

Balancing work and family life

- 4.39** For all participants, achieving a work-life balance was essential to being a working mother. As described above, many mothers compromised on the type of work they moved into in order to maintain a reasonable balance. Mothers appeared to be at their most content when they felt that they were able to sustain engaging and challenging work, while still being there for their children. This included being home in time to cook meals and put their children to bed, attending events such as school plays or trips, and being able to leave work in the event of an emergency. The mothers in this study cited flexible working as the key to maintaining a healthy work/life balance.

Balancing work and caring responsibilities

- 4.40** Many mothers in work characterised their daily routines as marked by juggling work and parenting tasks. This was the case for mothers across all groups in the typology. These mothers described balancing busy schedules and routines in order to keep on top of their work and manage their caring responsibilities and household tasks.

'It just feels like at the moment all I can see is that my weekends are just going to be constantly ironing, doing this, tidying up, hoovering and shopping, and it never used to be like that, it was more relaxed.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

- 4.41** The second phase of the peer element focused explicitly on how mothers make choices around employment. One significant finding that emerged from this phase was that most of the mothers in the sample are juggling a huge number of responsibilities. In addition to caring for their children, many mothers in the sample are balancing multiple part-time jobs or contracts, holding down substantial volunteering commitments, taking on additional caring responsibilities for family members, and managing all home-based responsibilities for their families. Although many had moved back into work – and felt positive about the financial gain and improved self-confidence that came with their employment – many also indicated high levels of stress related to the competing demands on their time.
- 4.42** Many mothers in the main study were calling on a range of support to deal with busy schedules. This included formal childcare, ensuring that

household chores were completed at particular times, and calling on help from others, including partners, to take on more responsibilities.

Structured routines

- 4.43** Some mothers, particularly lone parents, relied on having well organised routines in place in order to manage childcare and work. Lone parents with few barriers to work appeared to be the most organised, and described structured routines enabling them to work and parent. These mothers were less likely to be able to draw on the support of others, such as family members, friends or partners. A number of these mothers reported that the juggling experience was made easier through taking jobs that were close to home or had shorter hours. As discussed above, it was common for these mothers to have downgraded substantially and it is very likely that they were trading off pay and seniority in order to have convenience and flexibility. Unlike lone parents with many barriers to work, these mothers did not mention other networks to support them in managing their routines.
- 4.44** Although coupled mothers also had routines in place, their routines were more likely to incorporate others, such as partners or in-home childcare providers, so were discussed in this context. This is described in more detail below.

Support from partners and others

- 4.45** Coupled mothers reported that their partners helped them manage their daily routines. This was more common for those who were not comfortable on one income, where partners had often taken on additional parenting tasks such as picking up or dropping off children to and from school and helping more with domestic tasks. In some cases, partners changed their working patterns in order to accommodate the mother's return to work. This group of mothers seemed to be able to call on a substantial amount of support from their partners, which meant that they needed less formal childcare, keeping costs associated with working down. Again, working part-time hours locally and having a degree of flexibility in their jobs were important to these mothers being able to manage their routines.
- 4.46** Although coupled mothers comfortable on one income were able to draw on support from partners to a certain extent, their partners were likely to be working long hours, often in jobs that did not allow for flexibility.

Therefore these mothers employed other methods to help them manage family life (as described in the following section).

- 4.47** Data from the peer study indicated that coupled mothers do not universally benefit from physical and emotional support from their partners. A number of participants mentioned the demands of their husband's jobs as playing a vital role in their family life and their personal decisions around work. Specifically, those with partners in full-time employment, particularly in service industries, mentioned that the long hours expected from their partners' employers resulted in their being unavailable for childcare or to give support with other home responsibilities. This, in turn, affected their employment opportunities, as some participants felt that only one member of the family could pursue such high-stress, high-demand employment:

'I don't believe two people in one family can have very... stressful jobs... I don't think two of us could have a very stressful job without having a full-time nanny, housekeeper.'

British, owner-occupied housing, aged 46 plus, degree, partnered with twins age 13

- 4.48** Other participants mentioned that the unreliability of their partner's work put additional pressure on them to find something regular in order to provide some financial security for the family.
- 4.49** Lone parents with many barriers to work in the main study were the most likely to have family networks and friends who were able to share caring responsibilities. This was commonly because these mothers were still living in the areas where they grew up, while mothers from other groups were more likely to have moved to London from other locations.
- 4.50** Many participants in the peer element highlighted the critical role played by family and friends, both in terms of providing flexible, affordable childcare and offering emotional support to help mothers cope with the demands on their time. Participants who were new to London were less likely to have such support networks in place.

Using formal childcare

- 4.51** Formal childcare was used by mothers across all typologies in the main study. However, this was most likely for coupled mothers comfortable on one income who had often moved into senior roles and found it difficult to juggle work and family life. These mothers were more likely to manage

this by leaving work on time but working in the evenings or at weekends when necessary, and using wrap-around childcare provision, including au pairs or multiple types of childcare to enable them to work longer hours and/or manage any undesirable impacts of working. These mothers also relied on partners for support, although there was less evidence of partners altering their working patterns significantly in order to accommodate change. As described above, this was likely to be because many of these partners were in well paid jobs that had low levels of flexibility.

4.52 Lone parents with few barriers to work and coupled mothers not comfortable on one income also used formal childcare, such as nurseries or childminders, but to a lesser extent. These mothers were more likely to be in part-time jobs with higher levels of flexibility, such as school hours or term-time only, which allowed them to work around their caring responsibilities. Where formal childcare was used, it was typically for a few hours a day, or a few days a week. As described above, these mothers either relied on partners' support to collect children from their childcare provider or, where partners were not present, had very structured routines in order to ensure they were on time to pick up their children, thereby avoiding substantial late fees.

4.53 Mothers who had found work that was considered convenient often cited this as something that they liked about work. These mothers reported positive aspects of their work as being close to home or schools, part time, in a convenient location and flexible. Interestingly, mothers who were not as positive about their employment cited explanations linked to employment being inconvenient or difficulties juggling work and family life. Most of the participants in the peer element who had moved back into work also mentioned flexibility as being a significant positive aspect of their new position.

Benefits of combining work and family life

4.54 Generally mothers in the main study were positive about the work they were doing or had done. One of the most commonly reported benefits of working was social inclusion. Mothers across all groups in the typology discussed how they enjoyed being with other people, interacting with adults and working in a sociable environment. Linked to this, some also commented that they took pleasure in having time away from their children, or doing something that took them away from their role as a 'mother'. A number of participants in the peer element also indicated that

the social inclusion inherent in returning to work had significantly improved their self-confidence and self-esteem.

'I love being back in an office environment, yes. I think that is the main thing actually, it's that social aspect, and not just being a mum.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

'I quite like going to work. I quite like eating lunch on my own. I quite like all the things that looking after children doesn't offer you.'

Coupled mother, comfortable on one income

- 4.55** As described previously, the research overwhelmingly found that mothers were financially better off as a result of working. However, the financial benefits reported by mothers were sometimes offset by childcare and travel costs, which increased after moving into work. Some mothers described feeling locked into work in order to maintain their finances, with one mother describing how important it was for her to stay in work, and expressing anxiety as the possibility of losing her job.

'I worry all the time, it's oh my god, it only takes me to be sick, or one of the kids to be sick, like really sick, and then I have to give up work and what do I do then? I don't know what I'd do.'

Lone parent with few barriers to work

Staying in work – overcoming barriers to working

- 4.56** In addition to the benefits of work, mothers reported some negative aspects and felt that in order to stay in work, they had to be pragmatic and find ways to manage these. As the majority of mothers were still in work, or had not moved out as a matter of choice, it appeared to be the case that they were able to manage downsides to working well enough. For example:

'Sometimes they complain "Mummy, you're not spending time with us" but that's life. I have to work, for me to have them a good life, you know? If I don't work, I don't have money. If I

don't have money, I cannot afford anything for them, and they understand.'

Lone parent with many barriers to work

- 4.57** Most of the mothers who moved into work reported that they had not completely overcome the barriers to work they identified in the first interview. For some mothers, the importance attached to the barrier was less than the need or desire to work. The key issue for many was finding the right job that would ensure that barriers did not stop the mother from working.

Confidence

- 4.58** Throughout the study, many mothers cited low confidence as a major barrier to moving into work. Once in work, mothers still faced issues with low confidence as a result of returning after a long time out of the labour market. Although these mothers said that their confidence had improved after returning to work, this issue had not disappeared completely. In one case, a mother's lack of confidence was directly related to her occupational downgrading. Another felt that she had not fully developed the skills that she required for her role (such as IT literacy). In both of these cases and others, mothers were managing their lack of confidence, either simply by being in a working environment, or by doing specific things to combat those feelings. These included studying alongside work, joining clubs, volunteering and in one case, taking medication to manage post-natal depression. Mothers who had not completely overcome low confidence as a barrier felt that their confidence was improving or were hopeful that it would in the future.

Childcare

- 4.59** Some mothers reported that childcare was an issue they still had to manage after moving into work, particularly in relation to cost. This was mentioned across the typologies, including, perhaps surprisingly, by mothers who were coupled and comfortable on a single income. Mothers explained that they were mindful of the high cost of childcare, and that it was something that they continually assessed, although this was a smaller issue as children got older. This is in line with other research findings

which suggest that attitudes to childcare change as children get older.³² Some mothers explained that they were managing this issue by simply accepting that childcare was expensive and that it would cause a reduction in their disposable income. However, in some cases mothers explained that they had looked for or accepted work that eased the constraints of using childcare. For example, one mother reduced her hours so that she could look after the children when they were not in school, and conversely, another accepted full-time work so that she could afford the childcare that she wanted for her children.

- 4.60** Data from the peer element indicated that a number of participants continued to struggle with childcare concerns, even with older children. Specifically, a number of participants with teenaged children stressed that their children needed just as much support and supervision as they had when they were young. One offered a poignant perspective on the need for support for teenagers, in light of her own teenage pregnancy:

'I don't know – it's quite personal on me. As a mum ... I've got a little girl and I worry about her so much. There's so much that can happen when they are not with you, or when they are with somebody who doesn't love them ... As kids, I've been through some experiences that would have been prevented if my parents were there. And so that always stay in the back of my mind. And I am always trying to be two steps ahead, always trying to prepare ...'

Black British, council tenant, level 4 diploma, single with one child age 10

Juggling work and family life

- 4.61** The stress of juggling work and family life was reported by some mothers in the main study as an issue that they had not overcome but were managing. For example:

'I feel like I'm always rushing from one thing to the next, you know, it's like, getting home, having to instantly have food on the table because everyone is tired and hungry and cross... I feel guilty that I'm not there, and then because I'm working five days

³² K. Bell et al. (2005) *Lone parents working under 16 hours a week*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

a week, I don't have any days to get anything done, so everything gets pushed onto the weekend.'

Coupled mother, not comfortable on one income

4.62 Although most reported that they were dealing with this issue by accepting the difficulties it posed, some had developed strategies that that helped them cope with juggling work and family life. One strategy simply involved finding part-time work or making alternative arrangements (getting an au pair, for example) that enabled them to work and still give enough time to their families. Others stated that they had learned to become more disciplined at work and in the home to ensure that one commitment did not encroach on another. For example, one mother described how she strove to work efficiently so that she did not have to risk taking any work home with her.

Finding good quality part-time work

4.63 The final barrier that mothers reported that they had not fully overcome was a lack of good quality part-time work. Although a proportion of those in work had found good quality part-time jobs, some had taken full-time jobs even though this was not what they wanted because of a lack of part-time opportunities at a professional or appropriate level. Data from the peer element indicated that the lack of available part-time work often resulted in intense competition for such jobs, meaning that even highly qualified mothers had trouble finding flexible, part-time employment.

Case studies

Mother who moved into similar work

4.64 Lucinda is in her 40s, lives in social rented accommodation with her husband and two children, and falls into the mother 2 typology. Before motherhood she had a number of different jobs, including secretarial work. Her last job before becoming a mother was as a self-employed aromatherapist.

4.65 After becoming a mother, Lucinda worked informally at home as a secretary for her husband's internet business. However, at the point of her first interview she had not worked formally for 17 years. As a result, she lacked confidence in her ability to work. In her first interview, Lucinda was looking for part-time work to help provide more financial stability for

her family. She wanted to work during school hours so that she could also continue to care for her children. She hoped to combine her administrative skills with her pre-motherhood profession in the health industry. However, she was concerned that there was a lot of competition around, and noted that it might take her some time to find work.

- 4.66** Shortly after her first interview, Lucinda moved into a job as a administrator at a complementary therapy clinic. She found the job on the WLU jobs board.³³ She works 30 hours per week, which allows her to fit working around her family routine, and she is still able to pick her daughter up from school every day. However, her husband found it difficult to adapt to taking on some childcare responsibilities.
- 4.67** Lucinda is very happy in her job and wants to stay in her position for the short term. Her eventual aim is to find full-time work and possibly become self employed. She also has aspirations to buy her own home but realised she might not be able to afford to do this in London.

Mother who downgraded

- 4.68** Julia, a married mother of one in her 30s, lives in owner occupied accommodation with her husband and child. In year one of the study, Julia had been out of work for four years, having given up her pre-motherhood job as a solicitor. Julia's husband worked full time in IT, and earned enough for Julia not to have to work. Julia had aspirations to eventually return to work, although she did not want to go back to being a solicitor.
- 4.69** By year two, Julia had done some casual work and felt that these jobs gave her back some of the confidence and self esteem she had lost. Over the year she had realised she wanted to use her skills as a solicitor and move into doing volunteering on a part-time basis. She had also thought about retraining and becoming a primary school teacher.
- 4.70** In year three, Julia had moved into a part-time job (15 hours per week) working for a local community project. Since starting as a volunteer, she has progressed to manager and increased her hours. She is very satisfied with the job as it fits in with her childcare arrangements and involves

³³ During the period of research the WLU jobs board was relaunched as www.timewisejobs.co.uk

being outdoors, something she had not been able to do in her past career.

'Because the hours were things I could fit in with the children, because [my son is] just starting reception, I didn't want to be too far and suddenly dump them in school and leave them in after-school club. So it allows me to still pick them up in the afternoons and I'm local so if there's problem, I'm nearby.'

4.71 In the future, Julia wants to find a job that pays a bit more and possibly provides the potential to work more than 15 hours per week. She does not want too much responsibility at work and prefers to just do a job that she enjoys and that pays enough for her to have her own money to spend. Eventually her family's aim is to move to a cheaper area which would enable her and her husband to work part-time and spend more time with their children.

4.72 Data from the peer element indicated that, although those participants who had returned to work were generally pleased to have done so, many were pursuing employment options that they viewed as being unsustainable in the long term. A number of threats to sustainability emerged from this phase of the study. First, many participants indicated working very difficult hours. For instance, those who worked on a freelance basis mentioned working irregular hours in order to fit their work around the rest of their responsibilities:

'I have childcare on Thursdays and Friday ... so I am child free from sort of 8:30 til 3. So, I know I can do my work then, but all the other stuff just gets, you know ... Generally, it's just sort of working through the night or over the weekend or something.'

White British, owner-occupied housing, aged 36–45, degree, partnered with two children aged five and three

4.73 Others in the peer study indicated that they had to work variable hours (either day to day or week-to-week), which posed challenges for childcare.

4.74 Unreliable work was another threat to sustainability. Many participants mentioned the stress of having no long-term commitment from their employers. Although flexible jobs can allow more time with the family, many offer little financial security, which can then have a negative impact

on quality of life. Unreliable employment is also likely to be associated with a lack of long-term financial planning.

- 4.75** In addition to these central issues, many participants indicated that they would not be able to remain at their current employment in the long term because of low salaries or difficult working conditions. For instance, two participants doing freelance work from home mentioned feeling quite isolated in their work, while two other participants who found part-time work indicated that they regularly feel out of sync with the rest of their team, given that they only work a few days a week. Participants also indicated that they felt disadvantaged in terms of skills upgrading, because they were not regularly in the office, able to benefit from training and employee support.

In-work support

Linking mothers with good quality part-time jobs

- 4.76** It was common for mothers in the main study to have moved into work that involved significant occupational downgrading or made it difficult to balance work and family life. Encouraging employers to create good quality part-time jobs and linking mothers to these could help more mothers stay in work and minimise childcare costs.

Helping with the cost of childcare

- 4.77** Increased support to meet the costs of childcare would enable women returners to consider a wider range of roles (particularly those outside school hours). This in turn would help reduce occupational downgrading. The government has pledged to increase financial support for childcare. Because of the particularly high costs of childcare in London, more could be done to support working mothers in the capital.

Support to progress in work

- 4.78** The entry-level positions that some participants moved into were often temporary or zero hours contracts. While moving into work had raised the confidence of these mothers, they now wanted more secure work. Research has shown that progression from temporary to permanent work is less likely for certain groups, including lone parents and those with no

qualifications.³⁴ Support to help people move quickly into new jobs after an initial temporary contract and help them find permanent work after a history of temporary contracts may be needed for some of this group.

4.79 A desire for progression and advancement in work was expressed by many mothers, though particularly by those who were in entry-level roles in new careers. Research findings suggest that mothers moving into part-time jobs faced additional barriers to career advancement and progression opportunities. Progression from low-paid roles has been the subject of recent and forthcoming research.³⁵ This research shows that firms that progress low-paid employees have similar characteristics, though these are not linked to industry. Instead these share common features including:

- commitment from senior managers and all staff – seeing low-paid staff as a talent pool for development
- a systematic approach to human resources i.e. induction and appraisals which are aligned to a clear progression structure
- spending money on training
- a clear understanding among employees of opportunities
- peer support
- organisational growth and optimal staff turnover (creating opportunities for new entrants and progression)
- company size – with stronger progression in larger companies.

4.80 The importance of opportunities for advancement is not limited to those with limited professional experience. Within the peer element, mothers with high levels of education and significant professional experience also indicated that they had little hope for advancement within their current employment.

³⁴ Analysis of Labour Force Survey for: L. Gardiner, K. Krasnowski and T. Wilson (2013, forthcoming) *Work in Progress: Tackling the 'low pay, no pay' cycle in London and the UK*, Trust for London

³⁵ UKCES (2012) *Employer Practice in Progressing Low Paid Staff*; H. Metcalf and A. Dhudwar (2010) *Employers' role in the low pay/no pay cycle*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; L. Gardiner, K. Krasnowski and T. Wilson (2013, forthcoming) *Work in Progress: Tackling the 'low pay, no pay' cycle in London and the UK*, Trust for London

Help with retraining and starting a new career

- 4.81** A small group of mothers had retrained and started new careers that they felt would offer opportunities for progression, as well as flexibility to balance work and parenting responsibilities. While the mothers who had done this were happy with their choices, they were earning less than they would have in more senior roles in their previous occupations. In wave two of this study, we asked participants about which industries or occupations they believed offered family-friendly working arrangements. Participants typically reported industries or occupations that they did not have direct experience of (often teaching and education). Mothers on our panel who had worked in these industries or occupations, however, reported that they were not family friendly. It is important, therefore, that when making decisions about retraining and starting a new career mothers have access to tailored careers advice from advisers that understand their need to manage work with caring responsibilities
- 4.82** A number of participants in the peer element indicated a desire to begin a new career but indicated a lack of orientation as to how to go about it. These women indicated that they would benefit from some one-on-one counselling to help them identify their skills, think about possible options for new careers and articulate some concrete steps that could be taken towards such a goal.

New kinds of employee support in a changing job market

- 4.83** The peer research component exposed a number of challenges inherent in the non-traditional work situations often pursued by working mothers. Freelance/contract work and part-time and/or remote positions have created the need for new kinds of employee support. For instance, some of the women who work from home reported feeling isolated and disconnected from others on their team. Remote positions also prevent women from learning new technologies in their industries.

Self-employment support

- 4.84** Self-employment was a long-term aspiration for many women in the study. Many mothers wanted to be self-employed because they felt that this would give them additional flexibility, such as being able to stay at home during school holidays. For some mothers this was a long-term aim

that they would explore once they had several years' more experience. Others were keen to explore this option sooner. The support that participants said that they would need to become self-employed included business planning and advice on start-up finance. Most mothers were unsure where they would be able to access this advice, although one participant said that she would ask Jobcentre Plus.

- 4.85** Self-employment also emerged as a theme in the peer element of the study. Many participants indicated a desire to set up their own businesses, largely because they perceived that self-employment would allow mothers to maintain some influence over the competing responsibilities in their lives.

Where does this support come from?

- 4.86** Most of the in-work (and between work) support needs articulated by mothers in the main study are not widely available. Support to find work quickly after a temporary contract, new roles with different employers and linking entry-level staff with employers that offer progression opportunities may be available to some Work Programme participants.³⁶ However, most of the mothers in this study did not have access to this sort of support. In some industries this support may be offered by recruitment agencies though this would not necessarily cover all women returners.
- 4.87** The National Careers Service does offer online, telephone and limited face-to-face support with information about retraining, including finding a career with good work/life balance. However, given that none of the mothers we spoke to who retrained had used the National Careers Service, it is possible that awareness of the service available should be raised.
- 4.88** All of the mothers who told us that they hoped to become self-employed were currently working. As such, they would be ineligible for support through the New Enterprise Allowance, which is only available to those claiming out of work benefits. It may be that the confidence gained through entering employment was a prerequisite to thinking about self-

³⁶ B. Newton *et al* (2012) *Work Programme evaluation: Findings from the first phase of qualitative research on programme delivery*, Research Report 821, Department for Work and Pensions

employment. Therefore, the targeting of self-employment support at those out of work may miss an important group.

Summary

- 4.89** Mothers who moved into work strived to achieve a balance that suited their own personal ambitions and the needs of their families. Key to this was finding flexible work with an employer who understood the demands of motherhood. The findings indicate that some organisations would benefit from advice about how to incorporate part-time workers better into their office culture. Participants indicated that they want to feel valued, respected and involved, even as part-time workers.
- 4.90** In order to achieve balance in their lives, many mothers compromised on working hours, salary and level of responsibility. In many cases, this was because caring and domestic responsibilities were not evenly split between partners, especially where partners worked long hours. However, these compromises were often countered by benefits such as being close to home and having quality family time. Almost all mothers who moved into work had part-time jobs, and many remained in or aligned to the industries they worked in before becoming mothers, thereby utilising their existing skills. Despite taking part-time work, moving into employment typically resulted in financial gain, which allowed mothers to pay debts, gain financial independence and help support their families. Quality flexible work, both full-time and part-time, and in-work progression were long term aspirations.
- 4.91** For many mothers, the move into work meant managing barriers that had previously deterred them from entering the labour market. Mothers had to strike a balance between work and family, and drew on a range of methods to do this, including: support from partners, formal childcare and structured routines. Mothers also had to manage personal barriers, such as confidence and the lack of flexible full-time employment opportunities. Other barriers, such as low pay, a lack of time with family and the cost of childcare remained unresolved for many.
- 4.92** Our sample included mothers from sectors that were traditionally difficult to stay in after motherhood such as media, law and architecture. In addition to this, the majority of participants had worked in the private sector before having children, and tended to be in organisational rather than occupational jobs. It may be that mothers in other sectors and

industries were absent from this study because it was easier for them to stay in work after having children. However, as this was a qualitative study with a small sample, we were not able to confidently draw these distinctions.

4.93 Although most mothers moved into work over the course of the study, many did not move into work that was secure, allowed them to balance work and family life and offered opportunities for progression. Finding permanent work with good future prospects was still proving difficult for many mothers, despite having made the initial move back into work. Some mothers had retrained and begun new careers, while others held longer-term aspirations to become self employed. In most of these cases, participants were unsure of where they could receive careers or business start-up support.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 This study has, for the first, time explored the experiences of a diverse range of London mothers on their journeys back to work after caring for their children full time. Participants in the research lived in boroughs right across London and in all housing tenures. They ranged from those with no qualifications to those with PhDs; some mothers had never worked while others had established careers and senior positions in major companies. Their household incomes ranged from hundreds of thousands of pounds to those relying on out of work benefits. Research findings highlight the convergent barriers faced by women who have had children and are seeking employment. Whilst the research is based on the experiences of women living in London, most of the challenges are the same as those faced by women with children across the UK.

Key conclusions from the research

5.2 While some of the mothers we spoke to had chosen to leave work to care for their children, a striking finding was that, for many, this move out of work had been involuntary. Many of the mothers we spoke to had been made redundant while pregnant or on maternity leave, lost jobs because of the recession or returned to work but been unable to balance this with looking after their child or children.

5.3 Motherhood affected participants' attitudes toward work. While some mothers were looking for full-time work, most had a preference for part-time employment that would allow them to maintain influence over the competing responsibilities in their lives. These included responsibilities beyond childcare, including other caring responsibilities. Many participants reported difficulty finding good quality part-time work, and some mothers lowered their work aspirations in order to find this.

5.4 Despite their wide range of backgrounds and experiences, most of the mothers we spoke to shared a common set of barriers to work. These were: low confidence, concern that there was a lack of part-time and/or flexible work available and concern that childcare was unavailable or unaffordable. In addition to these barriers, a small group of participants –

usually lone parents with many barriers to work – had low or no qualifications, a lack of work experience and poor English language skills.

- 5.5** Encouragingly, almost all mothers we tracked throughout the three waves of research moved into work or made progress towards doing so. Forty per cent of mothers were in work after the first year of the study. These mothers proactively took a range of measures to work around issues and concerns relating to employment. By the third year of the study, 72 per cent of mothers had worked. Mothers who moved into work between the first and second year of the study tended to have additional barriers relating to low-level skills and little work experience.
- 5.6** Of those who entered employment, most found work through social and professional networks rather than replying to advertisements or engaging recruitment agencies.
- 5.7** Twenty-eight per cent of mothers did not move into work. The majority of these mothers were far from the labour market at the start of the study, and were very close to moving into work at the end of the three waves thanks to engagement in training and skills development. A lack of networks in relevant professional areas appeared to be a significant entrenched barrier preventing these women from accessing opportunities. Only a tiny proportion of mothers were not looking for work, usually because they were caring for children or family members with health conditions.
- 5.8** Mothers who moved into work strived to achieve a balance that suited their own personal ambitions and the needs of their families. Key to this was finding flexible work with an employer who understood the demands of motherhood. The findings indicate that some organisations would benefit from advice about how to incorporate part-time workers better into their office culture. Participants indicated that they wanted to feel valued, respected and involved, even as part-time workers.
- 5.9** In order to achieve balance in their lives, many mothers compromised on working hours, salary and level of responsibility. In many cases, this was because caring and domestic responsibilities were not evenly split between partners, especially where partners worked long hours. However, these compromises were often countered by benefits such as being close to home and having quality family time. Almost all mothers who moved into work had part-time jobs, and many remained in or aligned to the industries they worked in pre-motherhood, thereby utilising their existing

skills. Moving into employment typically resulted in financial gain, which allowed mothers to pay debts, gain financial independence and help support their families. Full-time work and in-work progression were long-term aspirations.

- 5.10** For many mothers, the move into work meant managing issues that had previously deterred them from entering the labour market. Mothers had to strike a balance between work and family, and drew on a range of methods, including support from partners, formal childcare and structured routines, to do this. Mothers also had to manage personal barriers, such as confidence and the lack of flexible full-time employment opportunities. Other barriers, such as low pay, lack of time with family and the cost of childcare remained unresolved for many.
- 5.11** Our sample included mothers from sectors that were traditionally difficult to stay in after becoming a mother, such as media, law and architecture. In addition to this, the majority of participants had worked in the private sector before motherhood, and tended to be in organisational rather than occupational jobs. It may be that mothers in other sectors and industries were absent from this study because it was easier for them to stay in work after becoming mothers. However, as this was a qualitative study with a small sample, we were not able to confidently draw these distinctions.
- 5.12** Self-employment was a long-term aspiration for a number of women in the study. Many mothers wanted to be self-employed because they felt that this would give them additional flexibility, such as being able to stay at home during school holidays. For some mothers this was a long-term aim that they would explore once they had several years' more experience. Others were keen to explore this option sooner. The support that participants said that they would need to become self-employed included business planning and advice on start-up finance. Most mothers were unsure where they would be able to access this advice, although one participant said that she would ask Jobcentre Plus. Self-employment also emerged as a theme in the peer element of the study. Many participants indicated a desire to set up their own businesses, largely because they perceived that self-employment would allow mothers to maintain some influence over the competing responsibilities in their lives.
- 5.13** Although most mothers moved into work over the course of the study, many did not move into work that was secure, allowed them to balance work and family life, and offered opportunities for progression. Finding

permanent work with good future prospects was still proving difficult for many mothers, despite having made the initial move back into work. Some mothers had retrained and begun new careers, while others held longer-term aspirations to become self-employed. In most of these cases, participants were unsure of where they could receive careers or business start-up support.

Recommendations

- 5.14** The aims of this study were to understand better what employment and careers support could best facilitate mothers' return to work, and optimise their career opportunities. In tracking their experiences over a three year period, the study was able to identify the range of barriers that women from very different backgrounds experienced; and, perhaps not surprisingly, how often these barriers were the same.
- 5.15** Over this period the study tracked the strategies that women took to navigate their way through and around these barriers, what outside help made a difference and why. In doing so, the study also identified some wider structural challenges in the labour market for women returners, many of which mirror previous research studies, and to what extent these could be overcome or managed to some degree.
- 5.16** Building on this learning, the following section makes a series of practical recommendations, for policy-makers, labour market intermediaries and employers on how best to support mothers to returning to, staying in and progressing on in work. Whilst the study was undertaken with London mothers, many of the challenges they face reflect those of women nationally and so recommendations are focused at both national and regional policy-makers.

1. Providing integrated employment support and advice

- 5.17** **Government should undertake a review of effective social innovations that build new solutions for families locked out of the jobs market because of caring responsibilities.** The review should be led by the Cabinet Office, and identify opportunities for pooling existing government resources to build on 'what works'.
- 5.18** A key finding from this research is that employment support for women returners has contracted over the life of this project. The majority of employability support is available only to lone parents claiming

Jobseeker's Allowance, and particularly those who do not find work within a year and move onto the Work Programme, or for families with complex needs. Potential second earners in low to middle income families lose networks and confidence following career breaks and yet have little access to publically funded employment and careers provision. While this project has demonstrated the employment support needs of women returners, a greater task will be ensuring that this support is available to all.

- 5.19** The majority of women participating in the study compromised on career choices in order to balance work and family commitments. This ranged from moving into temporary contracts, to occupational downgrading, to retraining in sectors perceived to have good family friendly working policies, to exploring self employment as an option.
- 5.20** There is a clear need for ongoing and tailored careers advice to help mothers navigate how to advance in work whilst managing their caring responsibilities/working in part-time and/or flexible roles, and to adapt to the challenges inherent in the non-traditional work situations often pursued by working mothers for example managing the isolation associated with home working.
- 5.21** This will become increasingly important with the roll out of Universal Credit where parents will need to make choices on how to optimise their hourly pay to fit around their caring responsibilities and childcare needs.
- 5.22** But mothers are not a homogenous group, as this study shows. Many face similar challenges in returning to the jobs market after a career break and policy-makers will need to carefully prioritise where public funds can be best placed, and what is the role of business and wider intermediaries in helping women progress into and on in work.

Specific recommendations

- 5.23** London government, namely the GLA, local authorities and London's Enterprise Panel should prioritise workless mothers, both lone and coupled (pre Work Programme), as a key target group when considering investment in future employment provision through the European Social Fund for 2014–20.
- 5.24** The Department for Work and Pensions should ensure that mothers with particular complex needs (including potential second earners under the

new Universal Credit regime) should have access to an adviser with specialist training in managing work and family issues. Advisers should be given discretionary funding through Flexible Support Fund ring-fenced either to support childcare costs during training or to commission tailored provision.

5.25 The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills should take on board the recommendations of both the Women's Business Council and the London Assembly, prioritise women as a key target group within the Adult Careers Service and consider aligning this funding with European Social Fund provision in order to plug the gap in support for coupled mothers.

5.26 Welfare to work providers should ensure that frontline customer facing staff are trained and experienced in understanding the specific needs of parents with caring responsibilities, and the challenges in moving from 'caring to earning'.

2. Intermediate and senior roles need to be opened up to part-time and flexible working

5.27 It was common for mothers in this study to have moved into work that involved significant occupational downgrading or made it difficult to balance work and family life. The business case for flexibility has been clearly articulated by a range of employer bodies for both employees and employers. Encouraging employers to open up opportunities for good quality part-time and flexible jobs, and linking mothers to these, could help more mothers stay in work and minimise childcare costs.

5.28 At a national level, the government needs a clear narrative on the business value of a flexible and agile labour market for employers, as much as for families. **The government should take a clear lead on articulating and promoting the business case for part-time and flexible working** by working with employer groups and intermediaries to showcase best practice examples of organisations offering senior, flexible and part-time roles and the individuals working in them. It should also **take a lead in considering flexibility across all of its human-resource strategies and recruitment practices.**

Specific recommendations

- 5.29** At a regional level the GLA should act on the mayoral commitment to create 20,000 part-time jobs by taking a leadership role within the GLA group as an employer through its own recruitment practices.
- 5.30** Best practice information and case studies on the business case for flexible working and flexible job design should be promoted to intermediaries through membership organisations such as the Employment Related Services Association and the Recruitment Employers Confederation.
- 5.31** Jobcentre Plus's National Employer Services Team should develop a programme of capacity-building support and best practice guidance on the business benefits of flexible and part-time working for its employer engagement teams.

3. Improve the availability of formal childcare and childcare subsidies

- 5.32** Most mothers we spoke to were not able to use informal childcare. For lone parents in particular, a lack of formal childcare outside the hours 8am and 6pm, or at different times depending on changing shift patterns was a constraint to work. Increasing the availability of flexible childcare, and signposting parents to this where it does exist, would help some lone mothers move into work.
- 5.33** Increased support to meet the costs of childcare would enable women returners to consider a wider range of roles (particularly those outside school hours). This in turn would help reduce occupational downgrading. The government has pledged to increase financial support for childcare, though with the particularly high costs of childcare in London, more could be done to support working mothers in the capital
- 5.34** **The government proposals to increase childcare support should be assessed for their ability to enable low-income mothers to access flexible childcare, particularly in London, where the high costs of childcare act as an additional constraint on work.**

Specific recommendations

- 5.35** In London, the GLA should closely monitor the impact on maternal employment rates and household incomes of Camden Council's recent

decision to increase free childcare provision to 25 hours for Camden parents.

- 5.36** The government should consider guaranteeing childcare support while parents undertake training, leading to a first full level two or level three qualification. This would support mothers, like those who did not move into work in this study, for whom low skills are a barrier to work.

Annex I

Peer research methodology

The peer research component aimed to enrich the findings of the *Working Mothers* study by incorporating participatory methods into the overall research design.

The aspiration to involve peer researchers was expressed in the original grant application to the Big Lottery: 'We feel it is important that peers are involved in the research process in ways other than simply being the subject... In parallel to the formal research stream, Women Like Us will facilitate and train a volunteer peer research team to carry out complementary research within their local communities. This approach will ensure that the quality of data collected through the formal research work is not compromised by bias, whilst also providing peers with voice throughout the project. Findings from the peer workstream will be triangulated with the formal research findings, and we anticipate that this work will add real depth and insight to the whole project.'

Women Like Us commissioned Groundswell UK to assist in the facilitation of the peer research component of this study.

Groundswell³⁷ is a registered charity, which exists to enable homeless and vulnerable people to take more control of their lives, have a greater influence on services and play a fuller role in their communities. Groundswell runs a range of innovative and inclusive projects which enable homeless people to be at the heart of solutions to homelessness. These include the Homeless Health Peer Advocacy; the Homeless People's Commission, which engages homeless people directly in national policy issues; service user involvement work; peer and participatory research; and peer education work.

From its inception in 1996, Groundswell has been a leader and innovator in the involvement of clients in the services they use and the decision-making that affects their lives. Evolving under the strap-line 'homeless and excluded people are not the problem; they must be part of the solution', Groundswell has worked around the country and abroad in promoting inclusive solutions and experimenting in methods to enable them.

³⁷ www.groundswell.org.uk

This successful partnership with Women Like Us and *Inclusion* has shown that Groundswell's seven years' experience of facilitating participatory and peer projects, working predominantly with people experiencing homelessness can translate to other excluded groups.

About peer and participatory action research

As a research approach, participatory action research (PAR) is not just concerned with collecting data but also with processes of empowerment and transformation. PAR seeks to work with people to do more than just document a situation: it seeks to find a basis and pathways for positive personal and social change. During PAR, people explore aspects of their lives and their experiences, and seek to understand and transform:

- how they themselves respond to their situation
- the services they use
- the policies that guide service provision
- the underlying societal structures.

It is a person-centred approach that recognises the potential self-determination of the people involved.

Peer research is a core data collection method of participatory action research. Members of the target population are trained in research theory and practice, and become co-researchers: designing surveys and questionnaires, identifying respondents, conducting interviews and participating in the interpretation and analysis of findings.

Peer researchers can be better positioned to identify and persuade others to participate in research. Their shared experience makes them able to overcome barriers – for example embarrassment or mistrust on the part of participants – that external research professionals can struggle with.

Peer research is founded on the principle that the beneficiaries of services often have the most nuanced perspective on such services and should, therefore, be involved in any attempt to evaluate them. Peer research empowers 'peers' to generate research questions based on their own experiences, rather than relying on research designs articulated by outsiders who may have little personal knowledge of the phenomenon under study.

Following these guiding principles, the peer component relied on the perspectives of eight peer researchers, who were recruited from the Women Like Us service-user population to participate in the peer-research component of the study.

Peer researcher recruitment

The 'call out' below for participants to undertake training, conduct interviews, facilitate focus groups, and participate in analysis and the steering group was placed on the Women Like Us website.

Opportunity to get some research training and experience

Are you a good listener? Have you got some time to spare? Want to learn some skills and meet people?

Women Like Us has commissioned some 'peer research' through a specialist called Groundswell – and we'd love you to get involved. Peer research involves training women who are registered with us to run a focus group and facilitate interviews with other women who use our services.

Why we need your help

Women Like Us is growing and changing all the time, and we are committed to keeping our clients at the centre of decision-making in our development. This is your chance to help give women who use us a stronger voice in the service we provide.

Time commitment

- Four days research training, within school hours, in the week of the 3 October
- Two to three days facilitating interviews at times that suit you

To thank you for your time and contribution, we'll give you a £150 'gift', and of course your childcare and travel expenses will be reimbursed.

How taking part will benefit you

It will give you an insight into research – a popular career pathway and a growing business sector. Research skills are a valuable asset to a CV and professional portfolio.

Through taking part in this project, you will learn the basic elements of research project design, as well as specific techniques for conducting focus groups and interviews. You will then conduct one focus group and five interviews, allowing you to practice and refine your new skills.

Following the project, if you are interested in research as a career option, Women Like Us will give you:

- careers information on market and social research
- a group feedback session with a Women Like Us career coach and a professional researcher
- a personal 'way forward' session to identify potential pathways into employment in research.

Seventy women indicated interest in participating in the project and 22 women completed written applications. This positive response is indicative of the desire on behalf of Women Like Us participants to get involved in a voluntary capacity to help in the development of the organisation and 'give something back' to a service whose intervention they appreciated.

Selection was based on ensuring we had a group who broadly represented the 'typology of mothers' established by *Inclusion* in the first wave of the study. Groundswell then considered its previous experience with research, trying to maintain a balance of women who had had experience of research and those who had not. It considered the aspiration of applicants in regard to research, prioritising those who were more interested in empowerment than in learning skills. Finally those who had previously worked one to one with clients in the past, had illustrated strengths in communication skills and working independently, felt that the project would help them to get back into work and wanted to give a stronger voice to women using Women Like Us services were prioritised.

'In the past I enjoyed finding out about people that maybe are not considered influential. It seemed a good way for wetting my feet again, getting out and meeting like-minded people. I liked the prompt feedback and the areas covered by the application form. I felt the questions tried to understand about me as a candidate in a different way than usual applications.'

Peer researcher feedback on recruitment process

Four peer researchers were recruited to participate in each of the two waves of the peer component. One peer researcher from the first wave was employed as a trainer and mentor with researchers in the second wave and went on to help develop the focus group guide and facilitate the group in the final wave.

Peer researcher training

Both sets of peer researchers completed a weeklong training programme with Groundswell staff that included discussions about the history of participatory research, best practices in managing bias and pre-understanding, and training on specific research methods. During the training week, the group worked together to identify gaps in the study to date and propose topics that could be fruitfully explored through follow-up interviews with the study population. They then developed the methodology as a group and devised specific interview questions, testing them on each other.

'Within the training period I felt like we were truly working as a group with everyone's ideas and comments taken on board. This is a difficult thing to achieve and I felt that the final guides we came up with were a true representation of all four peer researchers' input. It was also really great to meet five other women and work so closely with them for the period of time of the project. As I am only working once a week at the moment I really

needed the stimulation of being part of this process and has made me more energised and positive about continuing to look for work. It also has fuelled my interest in perusing work in the area of social research.'

Peer researcher feedback on the training

While all participants responded positively to the training, the first group indicated that they would have appreciated more time to practice interviewing so an additional training day was added in the second wave of training.

'This was nerve racking in the beginning but as I did six interviews I got into the flow and got to know the interview guide very well. If we had more time in training it would have been good for us to get to know the guide better by practicing more.'

Peer researcher feedback on facilitating interviews

Ethical considerations

A significant component of the research training during both waves was dedicated to issues of ethics and bias. The study followed all ethical principles outlined by the British Educational Research Association, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity.

Although peer research can be a very valuable component of a research design, the problem of bias is particularly acute when peers are involved. The 'pre-understanding' of a peer researcher can inadvertently steer an interview towards a personal vision of an issue, rather than relying solely on the participants' views and experiences. During research training, the peer researchers were, therefore, extensively briefed on the dangers of directing their own 'pre-understandings'.

During data collection, all peer researchers kept reflective journals in which they were encouraged to record any struggles that they may have had related to their own biases during the interviews so that these could be taken into consideration when analysing the transcriptions of the interviews.

'In general completing the interviews was enjoyable and very satisfying, as we had collected the data that we had been planning to, within the training period. It was challenging too i.e. not being empathetic and being drawn into scenarios with various women but this was something that was covered well on the course.'

Peer researcher on facilitating interviews

Participatory activities

A guiding principle of peer research is a reliance on participatory methods to obtain insight into issues that are not easily accessed through traditional interviewing techniques. Participatory activities can mitigate the power relationship inherent in a traditional interview setting by redirecting participant attention to a concrete activity. The peer researchers followed this principle by working with Groundswell staff to design a central activity for use during data collection. They were also involved in the articulation of individual interview questions.

It was interesting to see that the nature of the peer researchers' enquiry led to the development of 'tools' to guide the interviews. In the first wave the peer researchers wanted to investigate how motivation, attitudes and barriers, as well as self-perception, changed over time and in relation to significant events in a mother's life. This largely arose in response to the 'typology of mothers' from the first wave of the main study. The peer researchers did not believe that the typology captured the way that significant events can change how women feel about returning to work, and the way that such changing attitudes and motivations relate to the barriers, the experience and the way that they feel about themselves. To capture the complexity of the experiences of mothers they designed a timeline to activate the discussion around this issue.

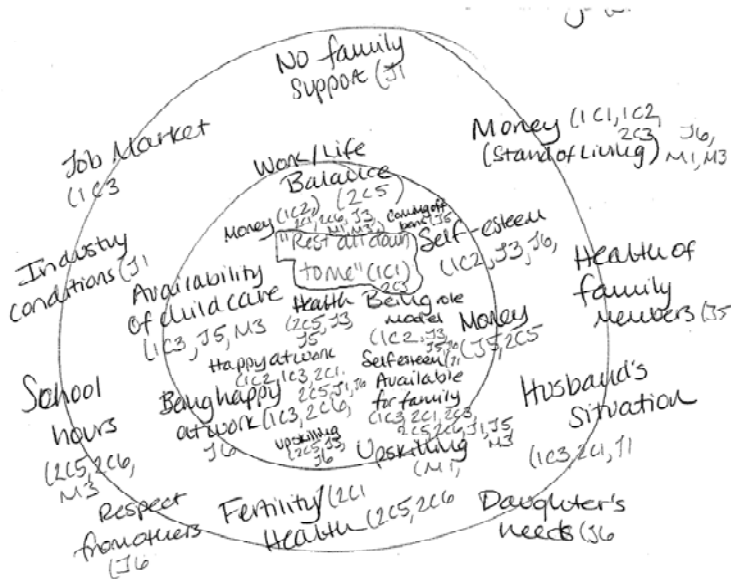
Do these things change over time?

Significant events in family <small>(e.g. birth of child, illness in the family, children going to nursery/school, separation, moving home etc.)</small>	Pre-pregnancy 1 st child	Birth 1 st child	Birth 2 nd child	Oldest child at school + youngest at nursery
Motivation to work	Fulfil career aspirations financial getting a little bit-wise	Motivation did not change most at this point - to not just be seen as a mum	Disappeared!	- financial - more time now to look - don't sacrifice for yourself + husband's job term - financial stability
Attitudes to work	Very career focused hard working v. important	less important	still always think about it. worrying about kind of of work-life.	More positive as getting up to do some about it - still daunting - seeing challenge of work - appreciate opportunities
Barriers to work	Not taking risks	Had to work 4 days/week to work 3	Childcare Not children have mild special needs - additional care needed	Self confidence nails childcare + cost
Self-perception	PR person defined thru work.	Talk between Mum + Professional	Mum + care + *	Mum Care + Relevance + (delicate balance but easier for when pregnant)
Approx. date	2005	2006	2008	2008 + 2009

Example of timeline activity result

In the second wave of research the new group of researchers were interested in investigating the sorts of things that drive mother's decisions about work and the influence that mothers have over the drivers in their decision-making. They created

a two-part activity to address the question. The first was a spider diagram of the things that drive choices around work. When the interviewee had completed the spider diagram, they were asked to work on another diagram that showed two circles; the inner circle represented the drivers over which they felt that they had control while the outer circle represented those over which they felt they had little influence.



Researchers' analysis of 'control of drivers' activity

'As the training period included us actually devising the interview and focus group guides for the peer research, we very quickly put theory into practice, which was the best way of learning.'

Peer researcher on facilitating interviews

Data collection

During the first wave, 20 participants were recruited from lists provided by Women Like Us of women who had recently participated in its workshops. The final list of participants represented a wide range of Women Like Us service-users, in terms of demographics and professional experience.

Mirroring the longitudinal nature of the overall project, the second phase of the peer component attempted to capture the continuing experiences of the women involved in the first round of peer research. The 25 women who completed interviews in the first year were contacted regarding continued participation in the study. Of the 20, 13 agreed to a follow-on interview with a new peer researcher.

True peer research uses peers as co-researchers during the entirety of the data collection process, rather than simply incorporating their views during the research design phase. The use of peers can further reduce problematic power relationships during interviews, often resulting in richer data. Following this tradition, the peer researchers were responsible for completing all data collection during the peer component of the study.

First wave

The data collection in the first wave consisted of two phases: an exploratory focus group and a series of semi-structured individual interviews.

The *focus group* was designed to generate topic lists for use during the individual interviews. Five participants attended the focus group, which was facilitated by two peer researchers with the support of the Groundswell team. The focus group lasted one hour and was held at the Women Like Us offices.

During the focus group, the facilitators focused on three primary areas:

- factors that women consider when identifying employment
- barriers facing women returning to employment
- experiences with Women Like Us's services.

The lists generated by the focus group were then circulated to all peer researchers for use during the individual interviews.

The peer researchers then completed 20 individual semi-structured interviews with participants. Groundswell staff did not accompany the peer researchers during the interview stage.

The interviews included four components:

- a review of participants' particular demographic background, family situation and prior professional experience

- a discussion of participants' current experiences with returning to work (focusing on their motivations to work, their professional aspirations, and the barriers that they were confronting)
- a timeline activity (discussed above), designed to help participants think through the various stages in their life since pregnancy that may have changed their motivations to work, attitudes towards work, barriers to work and/or self-perception and identity
- a discussion about the services they had accessed to assist in their return to work (both through Women Like Us and elsewhere).

Second wave

All 13 of the repeat participants were invited to share their experiences during a 60-minute semi-structured follow-up interview.

The interviews included four components:

- a review of participants' particular family situation and a discussion of any changes in employment that might have occurred since the first interviews in October 2011
- a spider diagram activity, designed to help participants think about what drove their choices regarding employment
- a 'sphere of influence' activity, intended to gauge which of the driving forces (identified in the spider diagram) are outside mothers' control and which are within their influence
- a discussion about participants' current quality of life, including questions about the support networks they access in order to improve or maintain their quality of life.

All group and individual interviews during both waves were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Third wave

In the final wave of research, Groundswell sought to facilitate a focus group with only the women who had moved on to employment. It contacted all 13 women who had participated in the second wave, 10 of whom were working at the time and nine

who indicated that they would be interested in attending a focus group. Unfortunately only two women were able to attend the final focus group.

The peer researcher who had seen the study through from the first wave worked with Groundswell in developing a focus group guide aimed at capturing what made employment sustainable.

Data analysis

Results were analysed by Groundswell staff using a 'focused coding' approach.³⁸

Preliminary results were discussed with the peer researchers who then worked as a group to organise the results around a number of 'major findings' and articulate a list of recommendations to respond to the major findings of the study.

Researchers participated in steering group meetings with Women Like Us and researchers from *Inclusion*, contributing to presenting findings, and participating in decisions made about the focus of the next waves of the study and how Women Like could respond to the findings.

Conclusions

Seven of the eight peer researchers maintained their contact with Groundswell and Women Like Us, and are keen to remain informed on the progress of the reporting and the dissemination of the research. Three of the peer researchers are also interested in developing a peer-support programme with Women Like Us, utilising some of the tools they designed and used in the study to help mothers reflect on their experiences and desires related to looking for work.

Here is an excerpt from an email from one of the peer researchers to the other seven who had indicated interest in participating in this action inspired by their involvement in this study:

'... I attended a parents meeting at my daughter's school and was reminded about the support and encouragement that women give each other when discussing issues that they can all relate to. This reminded me of one of the major findings of the peer research this year – the importance of "networks" for mothers in terms of getting back into work after having children.

³⁸ Charmaz, K. (2006), *Constructing Grounded Theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*, Sage

'One idea could be to propose some sort of mentoring scheme for women who are finding it difficult to find employment, where some of the exercises that were used in the interviews, are facilitated by "peer mentors" for those who are feeling isolated and out of touch with work but want to find employment..'

'The idea behind this is that:

'1) The evidence from the peer research would directly inform the scheme

'2) Recognising the power of mothers supporting mothers as 'peers'. It recognises the support and empowerment and understanding that women can potentially get from dealing with issues alongside their peers.

'3) Providing a scheme that is face to face and interactive, starts to confront the issue of isolation and lack of networks for mothers seeking employment.

'I know it was suggested that we could possibly produce a booklet like the "escape plan"³⁹ which I did think was excellent and is very well used in the homeless sector, but the reason I'm not proposing just a standalone booklet, is because of the significance of actually being together with other people in the same or similar situations and interacting, especially when we are responding to a major finding from the research that is about isolation and lack of networks.

'This is just a very loose idea at the moment and I just wanted to start the discussion off really and see if anyone is interested in contributing any ideas for a proposal.'

The group of peer researchers made several attempts to meet and develop their ideas together but as yet have not been able to. There are a number of factors that have prevented this project getting off the ground; first they are all mothers, most of whom have some working commitments in addition to family responsibilities. They are also living in different parts of London. This group of women is lacking neither passion, commitment, nor the agency to make this project happen, so why is it happening? Groundswell believes that this is evidence of the need to nurture and develop peer grown projects. Resources, both time and money, and support from existing organisations must be available to enable peer led projects to flourish, irrespective of which communities their inspiration sparks.

³⁹ Groundswell Inclusion Solutions, *the Escape Plan*, www.groundswell.org.uk/the-escape-plan.html

'I felt privileged to be involved in the Women Like Us Working Mothers peer research project. The training and support were excellent. I have developed research skills which will be very beneficial in my career... I would recommend anybody that has a similar interest to take advantage of the opportunity to be involved next year.'

Peer researcher comment on the project as a whole

'It has been an absolutely invaluable experience for me as a working mother and a woman growing in self-awareness around my gender and the impact of the world, employment, society and my role within it. Working for Women Like Us and contributing to the research conducted by the Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion and Groundswell has been an absolute privilege and I am delighted to have been able to contribute in a small way to such a major report and the rippling effect it may have in helping to change and challenge employment conditions for women across the board.'

Peer researcher comment on the project as a whole

Annex II

In order to understand the impact of increasing maternal employment in more detail, analysis was conducted to examine how much better or worse off different family types were if they moved into work of varying hours. Four scenarios were examined:⁴⁰

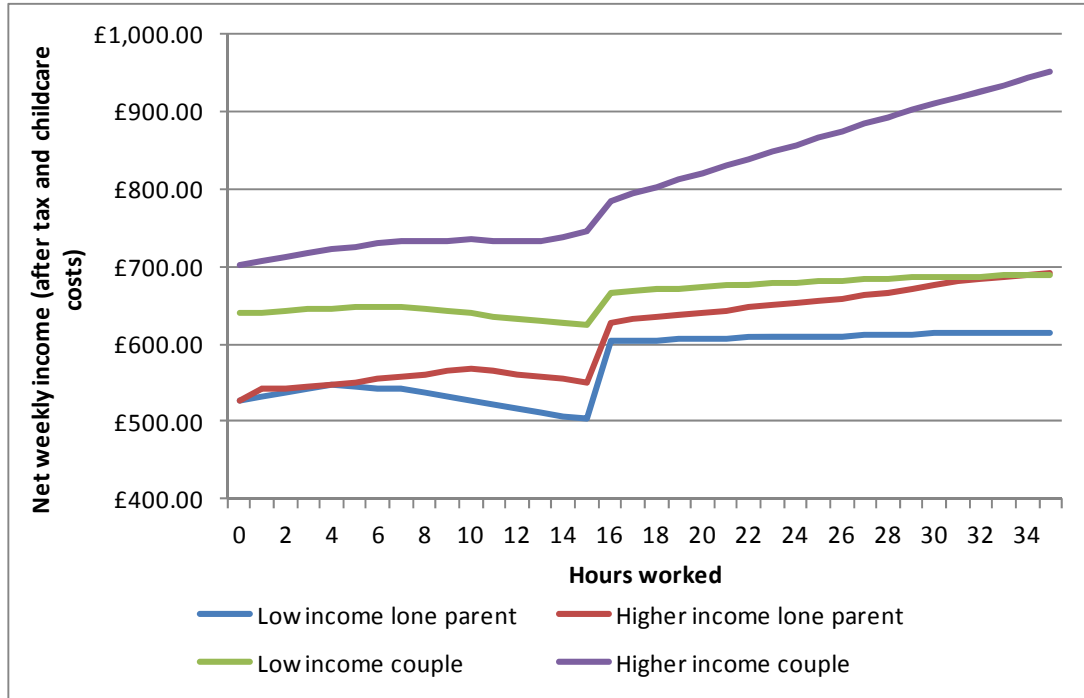
- a lone parent moving into minimum wage work
- a lone parent moving into higher paid work (of £15.40 per hour)⁴¹
- a coupled mother moving into minimum wage work whose partner is working full time at minimum wage
- a coupled mother moving into higher paid wage work (of £15.40 per hour) whose partner is working full time at the London median full-time wage (£34,623).

The chart below shows total household income, net of tax/National Insurance payments and the costs of childcare associated with being in work, but including all relevant benefits, including Child Benefit, Income Support, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit.⁴² The table summarises a range of other key statistics.

⁴⁰ These scenarios were modelled using Maximiser software produced by Ferret Information Systems. This software models all interactions of different benefits, to provide an accurate income based on all benefit entitlements. A number of assumptions and inputs were built into these models. Adults were aged 35, without health conditions, and had two children aged two and five. Families were renting a two bedroom property in the private rented sector, paying average rent for Lambeth (£313 a week – source: Greater London Authority), eligible for Local Housing Allowance at the Inner South West London rate (£288.46 – source: www.gov.uk), liable for average London Council Tax on a band D property (£1,000 – source: London Councils), and with the average savings of a household in the UK (c.£1,500 – Department for Work and Pensions Households Below Average Income 2012). Childcare was charged at the average London rate (an hour of nursery care at £5.07 and an hour of afterschool club for £3.16 per hour – source: Daycare Trust). Childcare was not needed for work of under six hours, and afterschool clubs only for 30 hours of work or more.

⁴¹ This figure was chosen because it is the average part-time salary on the WLU website.

⁴² Although not other costs, such as travel or losing certain passported benefits when moving into 16 or more hours of work

Figure A2.1 Household income, net of income tax and childcare, per week**Table A2.2 Key statistics**

	Low income lone parent (£)	Higher income lone parent (£)	Low income couple (£)	Higher income couple (£)
Household income in 0 hours work	526	526	639	700
Household income in 16 hours work	603	627	666	784
Household income in 35 hours work	615	691	689	950
Better off in 35 hrs' work than not in work (p/w)	90	165	50	250
Govt. saving: 35 hrs' work rather than out of work	-35	211	5	126

The chart shows that for both lone parents and coupled mothers moving into low income, minimum wage work, the combined effect of reduced benefit payments and (more importantly) childcare expenses makes them worse off in work, in real terms, as they approach 16 hours' work compared with not working.⁴³ After these mothers

⁴³ This in line with Department for Work and Pensions analysis: Department for Work and Pensions (2011) *Universal Credit Policy Briefing Note 10*, downloaded from www.rightsnet.org.uk/pdfs/ucpbn-10-childcare.pdf

moved into part-time work (of at least 16 hours) and qualified for Working Tax Credit (which includes an element that pays 70 per cent of childcare costs up to a threshold of £300 per week), household income did rise, but in these low income scenarios, at a very low rate. In fact, a lone parent moving into 35 hours of full-time work would only be £90 better off, net of tax or National Insurance and childcare costs, compared to being out of work. This is even worse for the couple mother, whose household income would only increase by £50 in full-time work compared to being out of work.

The picture for lone parents and coupled mothers moving into higher paid work was better. For the both mothers, work always paid, but childcare costs (before the Working Tax Credit threshold) meant that the lone parent was better off working 10 hours than 15. The lone parent was £165 per week better off in 35 hours' work compared to claiming Income Support, and the coupled household £250 a week better off.⁴⁴

It should be noted that the introduction of the Universal Credit will alter this picture slightly. To remove the jump in income associated with the introduction of Working Tax Credit (including support for childcare costs) when parents are working 16 hours or more, Universal Credit will provide childcare support as soon as parents enter work.⁴⁵

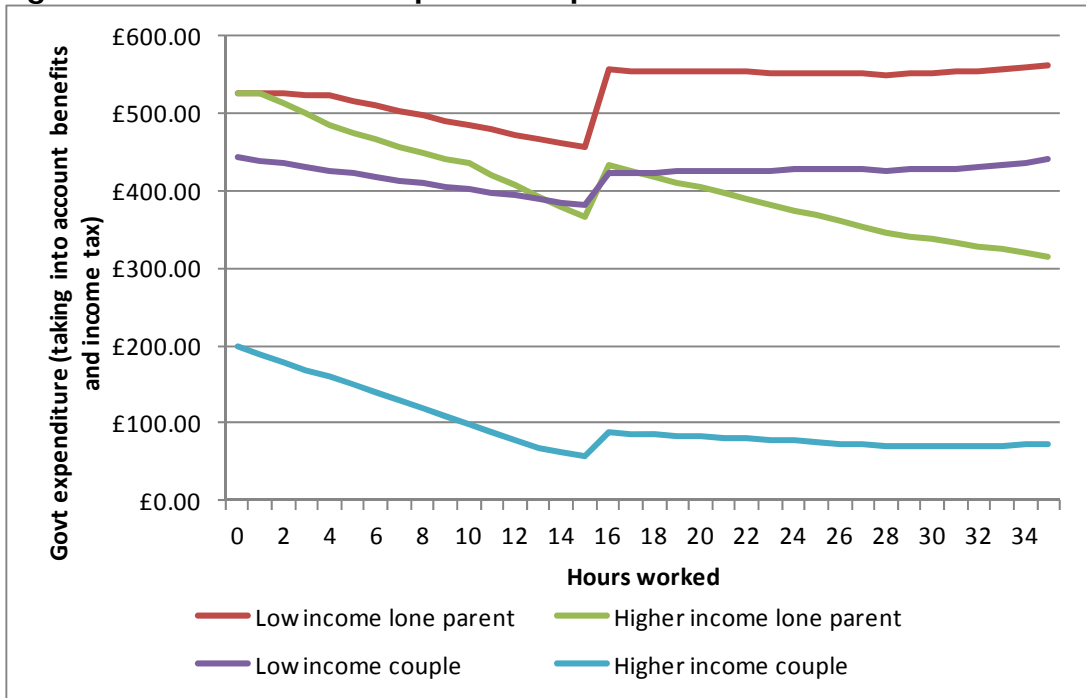
The chart below shows government expenditure⁴⁶ in these different scenarios. In all four scenarios, government expenditure falls as soon as the mother moves into work. However, particularly in the low income scenarios, government spending did not significantly decrease once mothers moved onto Working Tax Credit, primarily because of the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. In the case of the lone parent in low-paid work, the government actually *loses* money if a lone parent is in 16 hours of work compared to being out of work. In the higher income scenarios, government expenditure was either already low (in the couple scenario) or dropped significantly (in the lone parent scenario).

⁴⁴ This analysis is similar to an excellent and detailed analysis conducted by the Resolution Foundation in its report, *Counting the Costs of Childcare*, (V. Alakeson and A. Hurrell (2012) *Counting the Costs of Childcare*, the Resolution Foundation). Whilst our findings are similar, by using Maximiser software we have modelled different levels of Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit based on the household's other circumstances, including the number of hours worked and wage. This primarily explains the lower levels of increased income of low income families as they work longer hours, given that Housing Benefit is gradually removed as mothers work more.

⁴⁵ Department for Work and Pensions (2011) *Universal Credit Policy Briefing Note 10*, downloaded from www.rightsnet.org.uk/pdfs/ucpbn-10-childcare.pdf

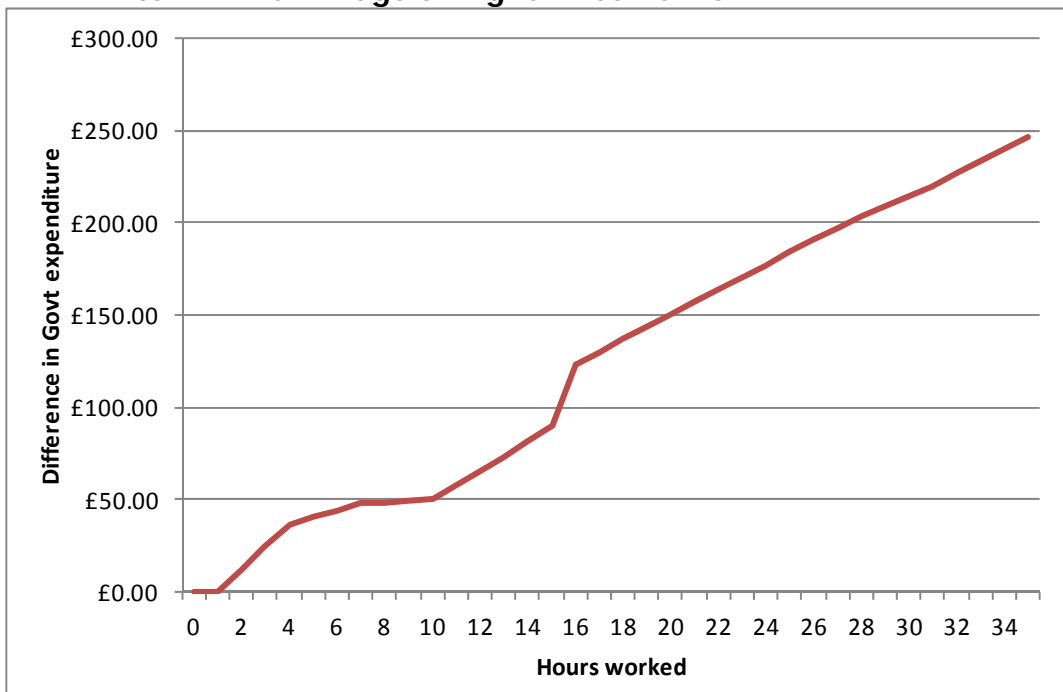
⁴⁶ Minus income tax paid by mothers returning to work

Figure A2.2 Government expenditure per week



The difference in spending by the government on benefits for a lone parent moving into work at national minimum wage compared with at the higher wage is significant, as shown in Figure A2.3.

Figure A2.3 Difference in government spending for lone parent moving into minimum wage or higher income work



Annex III

Introduction

This evidence review aims to provide a theoretical background to the 'Working Mothers' project and to identify approaches that best facilitate mothers' return to work.

Full systematic reviews take over 12 months to complete and so in order to obtain working hypotheses in time for the primary research we undertook an initial rapid review of the evidence. Rapid evidence reviews use systematic review methods to identify and critically appraise the available research evidence in a strategic and timely way that meets the needs of policy-makers and practitioners. This review identified and assessed English language studies published after 2000 in both academic and 'grey' literature. The primary question to be addressed was: 'Which employment support provisions best facilitate mothers' return to work?'

An initial finding is the relative dearth of material that directly sought to answer our question. Most pertinent academic research was conceived in terms of attachment to the labour market and the impact of the female life course on this. Grey literature was particularly sparse and, where it did exist, was often of poor quality. Two significant exceptions were: reports commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and a number of publications for the Department for Work and Pensions. Nonetheless, the relative lack of material directly addressing the question of what employment support provision best enables mothers to return to work highlights the need for further work in this area.

What makes return to work more or less likely?

This section outlines the factors shown in the literature to make a return to work after taking time out to care for children more or less likely. These range from the external context, such as the local unemployment rate, transport links, and policy regarding maternity pay and leave, to the labour market history of the mother, her family characteristics and attitudes to work and parenting. It then looks at specific initiatives that have been shown to help mothers move back into work before exploring the role of mini-jobs as a stepping stone into employment of more than 16 hours per week.

External context

A number of factors external to the mother and her family have an impact on her likelihood to return to work. A study of women's labour market access in Germany found that the regional unemployment rate had a strong impact on the likelihood of women returning to work. As regional female unemployment rises, the probability of women being in employment falls, though if women were able to access other labour markets through the existence of good transport links then this mitigates some of the impact of high local unemployment (van Ham and Büchel, 2006).⁴⁷ Conversely, however, Iacovou and Berthoud (2000)⁴⁸ found no significant association between the local unemployment rate and likelihood of return to work. Poor access to neighbouring labour markets is likely to be a contributing factor to the finding of Russell and O'Connell (2004)⁴⁹ that women returners in rural areas had lower employment rates than those in urban areas. Van Ham and Büchel (2006)⁵⁰ also found that the availability of childcare was a crucial factor. As the number of childcare slots increased, so the probability of a woman being in paid employment increased. Similarly, Himmelweit and Sigala (2004)⁵¹ found that difficulty arranging childcare because of waiting lists prevented some mothers from taking jobs or looking for employment. Numerous studies highlight the low public subsidy and relative expense of childcare in the UK, and some of these cite it as a barrier to returning to full time work (for example, Stier, Lewin-Epstein and Braun, 2001,⁵² Elliott, Dale and Egerton, 2001⁵³). The high cost of childcare has also been found to be a barrier to employment for mothers in the United States (Corcoran et al, 2000).⁵⁴

⁴⁷ M. Van Ham and F. Büchel (2006) 'Unwilling or unable? Spatial and socio-economic restrictions on females' labour market access', *Regional Studies*, 40, 345–357

⁴⁸ R. Berthoud and M. Iacovou (2000) *Parents and Employment: an analysis of low income families in the British Household Panel Survey*, Department of Social Security Research Report no 107, HMSO

⁴⁹ H. Russell and P. J. O'Connell (2004) 'Women Returning to Employment, Education and Training in Ireland – An Analysis of Transitions,' *The Economic and Social Review, Economic and Social Studies*, 35(1), 1–25

⁵⁰ Op. Cit.

⁵¹ S. Himmelweit, S. and M. Sigala (2004), 'Choice and the relationship between identities and behaviour for mothers with pre-school children: Some implications for policy from a UK study' *Journal of Social Policy* 33(3), July, 455–478

⁵² H. Stier, N. Lewin-Epstein and M. Braun (2001), 'Welfare regimes, family supportive policies, and women's employment along a life course', *American Journal of Sociology*, 106(6)

⁵³ J. Elliott, A. Dale and M. Egerton (2001), 'The Influence of Qualifications on Women's Work Histories, Employment Status and Earnings at Age 33', *European Sociological Review*, 17(2), 145-168

⁵⁴ M. Corcoran, S.K. Danziger, A. Kalil and K.S Seefeldt (2000) 'How welfare reform is affecting women's work', *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, 241-269

The policy framework, including maternity pay and leave entitlements, financial support for parents and rights to flexible working, all have an impact on women's decisions on whether to return to work. Stier et al (2001)⁵⁵ examined women's employment patterns in 12 industrialised countries. They found that employment continuity was highest in those countries in which the state provides support for working mothers. In these countries, institutional arrangements mediate the costs for families of women's part-time and intermittent employment. They characterised the United Kingdom as a country with a liberal welfare regime with low support for mothers' employment. Gillian Paull (2006)⁵⁶ found that in the UK, the right to maternity leave and maternity pay had strong impacts on the timing of return to work. Maternity leave creates a strong incentive for mothers to return to work at around the point of termination of the entitlement period, while maternity pay created an incentive for mothers to take longer absences from work. This is in line with findings from the 2008 Maternity Rights Survey, which found that some women who were entitled to extended periods of leave did not take advantage of this because they were not willing or able to take unpaid leave. The survey also found that women who were entitled to maternity pay and family-friendly work arrangements were more likely to return to work after childbirth.

Labour market history

A woman's labour market history and qualifications were found to have a strong impact on her likelihood of returning to work. It is well established that those with the highest levels of qualifications are more likely to return to work after having children (Russell and O'Connell, 2004; Van Ham and Büchel, 2006; Berthoud and Iacovou, 2000⁵⁷ and Duncan *et al.*, 2003⁵⁸). Interestingly, one study found that it was not only the level of qualifications that made a mother more or less likely to return to work but also the nature of those qualifications (Elliott, Dale, and Egerton, 2001⁵⁹). Women with occupational qualifications – such as nurses, lawyers, teachers and architects – were more likely to return than women with similar level but non-occupational qualifications – such as managers or civil servants with general science or arts degrees. The length of time out of the labour market was also predictive of the likelihood of return. Those who had been out of the labour market for many years were less likely to return than those who had been out of the labour market

⁵⁵ Op. Cit.

⁵⁶ G. Paull (2006) 'The impact of children on women's paid work', *Fiscal Studies*, Vol. 27(4), 473-512

⁵⁷ Op.Cit.

⁵⁸ S. Duncan, R. Edwards, T. Reynolds, P. Alldred (2003), 'Motherhood, paid work and partnering: values and theories', *Work, Employment and Society*, 17(2), 309–330

⁵⁹ Op. Cit.

for shorter periods (Russell and O'Connell, 2004⁶⁰). For those women who have more than one child, whether they worked between births was strongly predictive of whether they would return after subsequent births (Paull, 2006⁶¹).

Individual and family characteristics

The most commonly cited factor that reduces the probability of return to work is the presence of pre-school aged children (Russell and O'Connell, 2004; Stier *et al.*, 2001; Paull, 2006; Van Ham and Büchel, 2006⁶²). As we have seen, cost and availability of childcare are factors that reduce women's likelihood to return to work after having children. Once children are school aged, these factors reduce in salience. Perhaps surprisingly, given the gap in labour market participation between lone and partnered mothers, marital status was not found to be a major determinant of likelihood of return to work. Hales *et al* (2007)⁶³ found that the different rate of employment between lone and partnered mothers was explained by other factors, in particular housing tenure. Those living in rented (and particularly socially rented) accommodation were far less likely to be in work than those in owner occupied accommodation. Once housing tenure was controlled for, the employment rate of lone and coupled mothers was virtually the same. Berthoud and Iacovou (2000)⁶⁴ found that age was significant for mothers in couples. Mothers in couples were most likely to move into work at age 31 and were significantly less likely at both ages 25 and 45.

Work/parenting orientation

Mothers have a range of orientations towards work and parenting. Work/parenting orientations range from those who feel that their role is primarily as mothers to those who feel that their role is primarily as workers. These are not necessarily static but can change over time, for example as children get older or attitudes to childcare change (Bell *et al*, 2005).⁶⁵ One of the few qualitative studies in this review produced some fascinating insights into the role of class, conventionality and ethnicity in mothers' attitudes to returning to work (Duncan *et al.*, 2003). The study contained both white British and African-Caribbean mothers, and found that African-

⁶⁰ Op. Cit.

⁶¹ Op. Cit.

⁶² Op. Cit.

⁶³ J. Hales, S. Tipping and N. Lyon (2007), *Mothers' participation in paid work: the role of 'mini-jobs'*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 467

⁶⁴ Op. Cit.

⁶⁵ A. Bell, N. Finch, I. La Valle, R. Sainsbury and C. Skinner (2005), *A question of balance: Lone parents, childcare and work*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 230

Caribbean mothers were most likely to see full-time work as consistent with being a good mother. Class also had a strong impact, but in a rather nuanced way. Working class, white British women were split between those in unskilled/peripheral and in intermediate occupational groups. Interestingly, the poorest peripheral working class group had almost identical views on whether they wanted to return to work to the most high-status, middle-class women. Both of these groups identified primarily as mothers and not as workers and firmly believed that childcare should be carried out by mothers. Women in intermediate occupations and the more central middle-class groups were more likely to value paid work and saw their employment as a career. They were also more likely to see paid childcare as beneficial for their children.

There is some evidence that unsuccessfully trying to combine work and parenting responsibilities may itself reduce work orientation. Evidence from Germany suggests that the low employment rate of women with pre-school aged children does not indicate a lack of desire to return to work. Van Ham and Büchel (2006)⁶⁶ found that mothers with children under the age of seven were not significantly under-represented among those willing to have a paid job and that as the age of the youngest child increased, women became less likely to state that they wanted a paid job. They suggested that this may reflect a growing disillusionment with earlier plans for combining family and work. Russell and O'Connell (2004)⁶⁷ found that in Ireland a significant proportion of those with home duties who were searching for employment in one year had suspended this search by the following year. This perhaps provides further evidence of Van Ham and Büchel's suggestion that women with young children find it difficult to find jobs that allow them to combine work and family despite wanting them. We have evidence, then, that some women become less likely to look for work as time goes on, and this change in work orientation may reflect negative experiences of trying to combine work and parenting responsibilities.

Interventions that help

One of the few studies that sought to directly answer the question of what works best in supporting mothers back into employment was Collard and Atkinson's paper *Making decisions about working in one-earner couple households* (2009).⁶⁸ Participants in their study said these support needs that would help them move into work. Participants wanted help:

⁶⁶ Op. Cit.

⁶⁷ Op. Cit.

⁶⁸ S. Collard and A. Atkinson (2009), *Making decisions about work in one-earner couple households*, Department for Work and Pensions

- Increasing employability and confidence. This included CV writing, help with job applications and interview techniques.
- Finding work, in particular family friendly employers.
- Working out the financial implications of returning to work, both to ascertain whether their household would be better off if they were working and to find out about assistance with childcare costs.
- Finding good quality, appropriate and affordable childcare to support their return to work.

Ridge and Millar (2008)⁶⁹ found that support should not end when a mother moves into work but should continue into the first months of employment. They also found that social networks were key to sustainable employment, in particular a stable family life and good relationships at work.

Himmelweit and Sigala (2004)⁷⁰ identified policy changes that they believed would enable more mothers to return to work. They argued that parents should not only have the right to request flexible working but that employers should be required to meet these requests. Overcoming negative attitudes towards formal childcare could be encouraged by policies that frame childcare as positive for child development (rather than a tool to enable parents to work). They suggested that to do this convincingly, childcare would have to be available for all children and the cost to parents would have to be low enough to ensure that no child was excluded by cost.

Mini-jobs: a stepping stone to full-time working?

There has been a great deal of interest in the question that mini-jobs (jobs of less than 16 hours per week) might provide a stepping stone into part-time work of over 16 hours per week or full-time work. Berthoud and Iacovou's (2000)⁷¹ analysis of the British Household Panel Survey found that those working in mini-jobs were more likely to move into a job of more hours than those who were not and that this effect was stronger the more hours worked. They found that more people took up mini-jobs from no jobs than left a mini-job for no job and more people moved from mini-jobs to bigger jobs than in the opposite direction. Though they were able to state this association strongly, they were keen to stress that they did not examine issues of causality.

⁶⁹ T. Ridge and J. Millar (2008) *Work and well-being over time: lone mothers and their children*, Research report 536 Department for Work and Pensions

⁷⁰ Op. Cit.

⁷¹ Op. Cit.

Kasparova et al (2003)⁷² found some evidence to suggest that mini-jobs act as a 'stepping stone' to work of more than 16 hours per week. Their analysis of the third wave of the Family and Children Study found that this was particularly the case for lone parents, while respondents in couples were more likely to remain in their mini-job over time. They argued that this may be because of a preference for working short hours that parents in couples can afford owing to their partner's income.

However, not all research has confirmed this. Hales et al (2007)⁷³ sought to test Berthoud and Iacovou's⁷⁴ assertion through analysis of mothers' moves into work in the Family and Children Study. They argued Berthoud and Iacovou's decision to group those working in mini-jobs with those not working at all (presumably because of their eligibility for out of work benefits) accounted for the association between working in mini-jobs and moving into work of longer hours. In their own analysis, Hales *et al.* found that the 'stepping stone' sequence identified by Berthoud and Iacovou was a very small group in the Family and Children Study data, though they noted that it was possible that this was because of the shorter period of time in the Family and Children Study data compared to the seven waves in the British Household Panel Survey. They found that there were two dominant patterns associated with mini-jobs: doing them as a distinct, long-term pattern of behaviour, and doing them together with long period of time spent out of work. These spells of being out of work occurred both before and following spells in mini-jobs. They concluded that 'Based on the analysis of mini-jobs in this report, our view now is that this approach [mini-jobs as a stepping stone to greater work] seems to offer very limited prospects for additional working.' The evidence on mini-jobs, then, is equivocal, though the most recent research casts doubt on the role of mini-jobs as a stepping stone to work of more than 16 hours per week.

What is the impact of taking time off to care for children on mothers' earnings and working patterns?

There is a substantial literature on the impact of taking time out of the labour market on the working patterns and earnings of mothers. This section samples this literature, exploring the sharp move into part-time work and the associated weakening of labour-market position often found in the United Kingdom.

⁷² D. Kasparova, A. Marsh, S. Vegeris and J. Perry (2003), *Families and Children 2001: Work and Childcare*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 191

⁷³ Op. Cit.

⁷⁴ Op. Cit.

Part time work and a weakening of labour market position

We have seen that a number of factors help us to predict how likely it is that a woman will return to work after having children. In addition to examining whether women will return, there is a substantial literature on what the impact of taking time off is on the working patterns and earnings of those who do return to work. Two impacts are very clear: there is a sharp move into part-time work and a drop in earnings. Russell and O'Connell (2004)⁷⁵ emphasised the fluidity of the employment status of mothers. They argued that 'women's attachment to the labour market might better be viewed as a continuum rather than a series of discrete categories'. On the one side are mothers in full-time employment and at the other are mothers who are not working and did not wish to return. In between lies a range of experiences: those not seeking, but interested in returning; those seeking work; those in training or work placements; and those in part time employment.

The most common change to working patterns after having children is a move into part-time work. Elliott et al (2001)⁷⁶ found that the most common response to work and childbearing was a break followed by a return to part-time work. They argued that the high cost of childcare in Britain incentivises women to seek part-time rather than full-time roles. Russell and O'Connell's work found that in Ireland too, a 'substantial majority' of returners move into part-time rather than full-time work (2004).⁷⁷ Interestingly, some of those who moved into full-time rather than part-time work may not have chosen this in other circumstances. Himmelweit and Sigala's (2004)⁷⁸ analysis of the British Household Panel Survey found that 40 per cent of mothers who were working full time would have preferred to work part time.

Elliott et al (2001) found that women with higher level qualifications were more likely to return to part-time rather than full-time work. They also found that it was not only level of qualification but the nature of this qualification that led to a more likely return to part-time work. Those with non-occupational qualifications had similar (low) probabilities of returning to part-time work to those with much lower qualifications such as A levels or O levels. Though if they did return they were more likely to return full time than women with lower level qualifications. Elliott et al (2001) argue that, in contrast to some other European countries, the quality of part-time work in Britain has tended to be poor. Rather than representing a reduction in hours from a full-time job, part-time work tends to result in occupational downgrading. This finding is echoed in Gillian Paull's work. She finds that there is a

⁷⁵ Op. Cit.

⁷⁶ Op. Cit.

⁷⁷ Op. Cit.

⁷⁸ Op. Cit.

sharp movement towards part-time work and also towards non-permanent and non-supervisory roles (Paull, 2006).⁷⁹ Himmelweit and Sigala (2004)⁸⁰ find that the financial cost of being a mother is higher in the UK than most other European countries. Moreover for mothers with low to mid-level skills and those whose motherhood interrupts their career the financial cost is highest.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, if this move into part-time work is also a move into poorer quality jobs, earnings after taking time out caring for children tend to decrease. In their analysis of women's employment patterns across industrialised countries, Stier *et al.* (2001)⁸¹ found that regimes that offered high levels of support for women's employment minimised the costs to women of employment interruptions and part-time work. La Valle *et al.* (2008)⁸² found that the fall in earnings that women in Britain experienced after moving into part-time work was not entirely accounted for by their reduced hours. One study from the United States offers an explanation for the poor quality of work that women returners move into. Bruce Rankin's study of low income mothers in the United States found that most jobs were found through informal contacts (Rankin, 2003).⁸³ He argued that the poor quality of work that women found was because female networks contained fewer resourceful contacts than male networks, and that women may benefit most from improved access to public and private employment intermediaries.

Conclusion

Informing the Working Mothers project and areas for future research

This evidence review alerts us to a number of factors that make mothers' return to work more or less likely. Over the course of the Working Mothers project, we will investigate whether certain groups of mothers find it easier or more difficult to move into work and may need particular support. These factors will be taken into account in both recommendations for collection of management information data and in topic guide design for the qualitative interviews.

⁷⁹ Op. Cit.

⁸⁰ Op. Cit.

⁸¹ Op. Cit.

⁸² I. La Valle, E. Clery, and M. C. Huerta (2008), *Maternity Rights and Mothers' Employment Decisions*, Department for Work and Pensions

⁸³ B. Rankin, (2003), 'How low-income women find jobs and its effects on earnings', *Work and Occupations*, 30,3, 281–301

As we have seen, the external context of parental rights regarding pay, leave and flexible working, and the availability and affordability of childcare, have an impact on the likelihood and timing of mothers' return to work. It will be important for this study to ensure that any changes to maternity/parental rights and pay, as well as entitlements to childcare, are monitored and factored into our findings. It is also important, at this juncture, to outline what these rights and availabilities are in order to establish a baseline. We have seen that the United Kingdom is characterised as a country with a liberal welfare regime with low levels of support for mothers' employment.

Work and employment entitlements

Maternity leave – employees are entitled to 26 weeks of 'ordinary maternity leave' and 26 weeks of 'additional maternity leave'. Mothers' rights are slightly different in these two periods, in particular pension contributions do not have to be paid after 39 weeks.

Maternity pay – employees who have worked for at least 26 weeks by the 15th week before they were due to give birth are eligible for statutory maternity pay. This pays 90% of the mother's earnings for the first six weeks and then a flat rate of £124.88 or 90% of the mother's earnings, whichever is less, for the remaining 33 weeks. Mothers who are, or who have recently been, employed but are not eligible for statutory maternity pay, are eligible for the Maternity Allowance. This pays £124.88 or 90% of the mother's earnings (whichever is less) for a maximum period of 39 weeks.

Flexible working – employees with children under six or disabled children under 18 are entitled to request flexible working conditions, including part-time work. Employers must consider requests but are not required to agree to new flexible terms if there are business grounds for not doing so.

Childcare – children aged three and four are eligible for 12.5 hours of free early education for 38 weeks per year, this is due to rise to 15 hours in September 2010. Working parents on low incomes are eligible for tax credits that cover up to 80% of childcare costs. Average childcare costs for 25 hours per week are £88 in England, which is more than half gross average part-time earnings of £153 per week. Childcare costs are rising at above the rate of inflation. Childcare costs in London are higher than the national average with parents in London paying up to £11,050 per year for 25 hours childcare per week, or £22,100 for 50 hours.

The evidence in this review was equivocal about the impact of local rates of unemployment on mothers' employment. Nonetheless, it is worth noting at this

juncture that figures up to May 2010 show unemployment in the capital is 9.3%, 1.4 points higher than the national unemployment rate. Impending public service cuts may push this rate higher over the course of this study.

We have seen that time out of the labour market can have a negative impact on mothers' return to work. The level and nature of a mother's qualification also has an impact. We should explore the possibility of recording the length of time out of the labour market, qualification level and whether qualifications are occupational or organisational, in the management information system. We should also explore time out of the labour market, and level and nature of qualifications in the qualitative interviews. Given the importance of housing tenure in Hales *et al* (2007), this should be explored in qualitative interviews and, if possible, included in management information data. Work/parenting orientation should be explored in qualitative interviews, as this would be difficult to capture in management information data fields. This can be done through exercises to explore attitudes and constraints to working as well as attitudes to formal childcare. Given that this in particular seems to be dynamic, it will be interesting to monitor changes to this in second and third year interviews. Another important contribution to our understanding may come from exploring the role of mini jobs in potentially acting as a stepping stone into longer hours of working. The review was clear in showing that there is a sharp move into part-time work and a downward shift in earnings at return often involving a fall in occupational grade. If possible, levels of supervisory responsibility and whether work is permanent should be recorded in management information data, and should certainly be examined in qualitative interviews.

This review aimed to establish hypotheses of what works for whom and whether particular groups of mothers will be harder or easier to support back into employment. Based on the findings from the review, we suggest the following:

- Mothers with higher level qualifications will find it easier to return to work.
- Mothers with less time out of the labour market will find it easier to return to work.
- Mothers with occupational qualifications will find it easier to return to part time work without a downgrading in occupational grade.
- Mothers in social housing will find it harder to return to work.
- Mothers with less stable lives will particularly benefit from ongoing support in order to move into sustained employment.

- Mothers with organisational qualifications will particularly benefit from job brokerage and job search support.