

SUMMARY OF THE PEER REVIEW

“PATHWAYS TO WORK FOR LONE PARENTS”

Belfast (Northern Ireland), 10-11 May 2010

1. INTRODUCTION

The Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland hosted a Peer Review in Belfast that brought together ministry officials and independent experts from ten countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic¹, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia), as well as representatives from DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities at the European Commission.

The purpose of the ‘*Pathways to Work for Lone Parents*’ (PWLP) pilot presented by the Host Country was to increase lone parent entry into the labour market by offering the services of a dedicated, specialist lone parent adviser from first contact with a Jobs and Benefits Office (JBO) through to job entry. As part of the pilot, lone parents could be offered work preparation provision combining training and work experience and new financial incentives of a Return to Work Credit and an in-work emergency fund.

The barriers to work for lone parents are similar across Europe and elements of the pilot offer some scope for transferability – the role of specialist adviser in activating lone parents and in addressing practical and personal barriers to employment; the pre-employment training and work experience to address employability issues; the better-off calculation (BOC) to demonstrate the financial implications of work (for example on benefit receipt) and the use of in-work benefits to create additional financial incentives to return to work. However, as the pilot has shown, these elements are not sufficient without the offer of suitable job opportunities, the availability of flexible working practices and high quality, affordable childcare.

This summary draws on the contributions from the thematic experts and government officials during the meeting. The papers prepared by independent experts from the host and peer countries in advance of the meeting provide a more detailed elaboration of the issues mentioned in this summary and can be found on the website of the Mutual Learning Programme, <http://www.mutual-learning-employment.net/>. A table summarising the assessment of the host country example by the independent thematic experts from the Peer countries is also available on the website.

2. EUROPEAN POLICY CONTEXT

Across the EU, there has been a general increase in lone-parent households in absolute numbers and as a proportion of all households (1 in 10 EU household). Lone parents often have to overcome additional barriers in order to gain a foothold on the labour market and earn a sufficient income to escape welfare dependency. As a result, lone parents have a higher likelihood of being among the poorest households in the EU, with children being brought up by lone *mothers* being at greatest risk of poverty. The new EU2020 strategy and the new Employment Guidelines set an ambitious target of reducing by 25% the number of Europeans living below national poverty lines. Employment is widely agreed to be the most important means by which individuals can lift themselves out of poverty.

¹ Czech Republic was represented by the government official; the independent expert was unable to attend.

Removing inherent disincentives to work and creating the right conditions for making work pay are seen as important for the activation of this group. Lone-parents are likely to experience significant difficulties in seeking to reconcile work and family life. Reconciliation policies are therefore key in contributing to a better integration of lone parents in the labour market. The monitoring of the Barcelona targets for childcare provision therefore have added significance for this target group, as access to affordable, good quality childcare remains difficult in many Member States.

In 2008, the Commission published a report on the '[implementation of the Barcelona objectives concerning childcare facilities for pre-school-age children](#)'. The report deals only with formal systems of child care, i.e., all forms of childcare provision organised or controlled by a public or private body. It emphasises the importance of childcare provision as a support for employment, for gender equality and for social inclusion (especially for lone-parent families) and for people's ability to plan a family (thus influencing fertility rates and the EU's demographic development). It shows that many countries continue to lag significantly behind the targets set.

The Commission has no direct powers in the field of child care provision but will continue to monitor the Barcelona targets regularly, providing support through statistics, and making specific recommendations to Member States where necessary. It will also promote exchanges of national experiences and will encourage research into working conditions in the pre-school childcare sector and into ensuring that jobs in this field are more highly valued. National and local authorities and social partners are called upon to play an active part in developing the provision of accessible, affordable and quality early childcare services, in particular by using the co-financing opportunities offered by the European Structural Funds.

3. THE HOST COUNTRY EXPERIENCE

a. Characteristics of lone parents in Northern Ireland

The lone parent agenda has been identified as critical to the achievement of the welfare to work and child poverty strategy. Based on the conviction that the most effective route out of poverty is through work, the UK and Northern Ireland Governments have committed to raising the employment rate in the UK to 80% (75% in Northern Ireland by 2020), moving 70% of lone parents into employment by 2010, and halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020.

Figures from the May 2009 Client Group Analysis² indicated that there were 39,600 single parents claiming a key benefit (17.35% of all key benefit claimants), of these 35,540 (89.7%) were female and 4,060 (10.3%) were male. It appears that overall numbers had fallen by 1,480 (3.6%) since May 2006. A further breakdown of the total figure indicates that 3,880 (10%) could be regarded as "active" in the labour market as they are claiming Job Seekers' Allowance (JSA); 11,500 (29%) are economically inactive due to ill health or disability; and, 24,200 (61%) are economically inactive due to child caring responsibilities. Of the 24,200 inactive due to child caring responsibilities, 16,980 (70%) had been claiming benefit for 2 years or more³.

² From the "Northern Ireland Client Group Analysis" (Department for Social Development (DSD)) (May 2009).

³ Department for Employment and Learning, '*Lone parents in the labour market: Future prospects in Northern Ireland*'. Official paper prepared for the PR (27 April 2010).

b. Pathways to Work for Lone Parents (PWLP)

The purpose of the *Pathways to Work for Lone Parents* (PWLP) pilot was to increase lone parent entry to employment by offering the services of a dedicated, specialist lone parent adviser from first contact with a Jobs and Benefits Office (JBO) through to job entry. As part of the pilot, lone parents could be offered work preparation provision combining training and work experience and new financial incentives of a Return to Work Credit of £40 (€45) per week and an in-work emergency fund.

The overall policy context for the PWLP pilot was determined largely by the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Section 75 of the Act required the development of all policies to be accompanied by an equality impact assessment. This served to favour the development of policies which contribute to the reduction of gender gaps, including in employment. Social security is a devolved function under the authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly, but the wider benefit framework essentially follows the system agreed at Westminster for the whole of the UK. The pilot was also intended to assist with the integration of lone parents into the labour market in the context of a progressive lowering of the age of the youngest child when lone parents will be expected to actively seek work (and move from Income Support benefit to Job Seekers' Allowance). While lone parents could previously receive Income Support (without the need to look for work) until the youngest child was 16, this is being progressively lowered to age 7 by October 2010.

The availability of specialist advisers, trained to have a thorough understanding of the issues affecting lone parents was seen as critical for successful interventions aimed at supporting lone parents to access the labour market. Such specialist advisers can build up the confidence of participants and help them deal with the specific personal, financial and practical issues that will impact on their ability to access work, either through work preparation programmes, further education, training or via subsidised work placements.

As stated in the Host Paper, such programmes can only be successful if other mitigating factors are also addressed. These factors include, the need to ensure that there are financial benefits accruing from work for lone parents (i.e. that they are better off at work). It is also very important to ensure that flexible work opportunities are offered which match lone parents' family commitments and that affordable quality childcare is accessible.

c. The Personal Advisers' perspective:

In general, for the Personal Advisers, some of whom presented their perspective at the Peer Review, the key elements of the PWLP pilot were:

- The availability of a simple tool to carry out a better-off calculation (BOC), making it possible to demonstrate to lone parents the financial consequences of their different employment options. It takes into account the full range of benefits available, wages and hours worked. The BOC was a significant incentive, and encouragement, to lone parents to seek work. When it was first introduced (generally, not just for lone parents), the most challenging aspect was ensuring that housing costs were accurately accounted for. It was considered as an essential tool for advisers to demonstrate the potential financial benefits from work, to reassure clients and support their financial planning and appears to have a major impact on their decision to consider work.
- The special function performed by the dedicated advisor, trained not only in special psychological skills to understand and motivate lone parent but also with the subject knowledge to signpost lone parents to supporting key services (housing, childcare, social service and other community based support). It was also important that the ratio between clients and specialist advisors was lower than the ratio between general PES advisors and clients, thus allowing the same advisors to be responsible for the same individual throughout.
- In relation to the training and preparation programme, in some areas, there was difficulty in finding sufficient placements with employers in the area. Better engagement with

employers is therefore essential, not only to provide work placements but also challenge employer attitudes and to encourage them to provide opportunities for flexible working. A positive aspect of training and work placements under the pilot was seen to be the offer of childcare provision, which is not available on general PES programmes.

d. Results

As indicated in the Host Country paper, the main results were as follows:

- A total of 3,733 lone parents had recorded activity in the four pilot offices and 96% participated in a Work Focused Interview.
- The pilot offices referred more lone parents to the work preparation programmes than mainstream offices but the take-up volumes were not substantially increased although the reasons why are not clear.
- 88% of lone parents surveyed, valued seeing the same specialist lone parent adviser for every visit – enabling a depth of understanding of needs and more effective tailoring of support.
- 539 lone parents entered employment. Job entry was higher in the pilot areas, i.e. 12% of the caseload, compared to 1% in mainstream offices.
- A total of 410 (76%) of lone parents entering work received the Return to Work Credit (RTWC) – qualitative and quantitative findings show this was a positive incentive to return to work.
- The cost per job entry on the pilot was £2,683 (€3206). Evaluation estimates suggest average annual earnings for lone parents entering employment, with the RTWC, would be £8,084 (€8,992) which compares favourably to the average Income Support payment of £5,112 (€5,686).

As indicated above the PWLP exhibited some degree of success but it also highlighted some weaknesses in the approach taken. In particular there was insufficient evidence from the pilot to determine if outreach was effective and there was no evidence that vocational or other training had any impact or was even attractive or appropriate for the client group. These issues, couple with the persistent lack of available, affordable childcare in Northern Ireland represent some challenges for programme design in the future.

As mentioned above, due to recent changes in Lone Parents obligations, lone parents with older children may no longer be entitled to Income Support solely on the grounds of being a Lone Parent, subject to certain exemptions and conditions. For the lone parents, it will mean a transfer from Income Support to the “active” Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) conditionality regime with the expectation of being available and looking for work in the same way as other JSA claimants.

The changes in legislation and the lessons drawn from the PWLP inspired a new approach, the **LEMIS Community Voluntary Programme**. This approach was community-based, using local knowledge of providers of the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) in areas of high social deprivation. This was regarded as a more effective approach to outreach. LEMIS provides tailored assistance to help voluntary clients overcome the personal barriers that are preventing them from finding and keeping a job. This service, independent from the PES, is run by and in the community and is designed to complement the services available through the Jobs and Benefits offices in the targeted areas (areas of high unemployment/low employment that were identified by the Department using the latest version of the Northern Ireland Index of Multiple Deprivation).⁴

⁴ Department for Employment and Learning, ‘Lone parents in the labour market: Future prospects in Northern Ireland’. Official paper prepared for the PR (27 April 2010).

As a result of the recession and wider budgetary developments, lone parent specialist advisors have now been incorporated into mainstream PES advisor teams carrying out Work Focussed Interviews. Other elements of the PLWP have also been retained as part of wider mainstream provision (such as Return to Work Credits), while some have been discontinued (such as the Local Development Officer Posts – the outreach element of the work has not been partly taken on by LEMIS through community level groups).

4. DISCUSSION AND LEARNING

a. Definition of lone parents.

There is no standard definition of lone parent across Europe. As a result, existing statistics are not always comparable as the data collected might not cover all the aspects of this family situation.

In Northern Ireland, for example, a jobseeker is defined as a lone parent if he/she is the single adult head of household, with dependents under the age of 18. In Slovenia, on the other hand, single parents who have financial support from ex-partners are not regarded as lone parents (hence the relatively low number of lone parents). A number of countries argued that in some cases lone parents who actually had a partner were not declaring a supporting partner or in some cases maintaining separate addresses in order to retain certain benefit entitlements, although the scale of this phenomenon has not been assessed.

b. Barriers to work for lone parents

In-depth, qualitative studies in a number of countries, including the UK, show that it is the availability and cost of **childcare** that is the largest single factor in a lone parent's decision whether or not to work. In some countries formal childcare arrangements are often supplemented and reinforced by informal care arrangements, thanks to the existence of informal support networks. But in most countries childcare provision remains a problem for lone parents with children less than three years of age, as there are only few places available for the 0-3 age group in public or subsidised crèches. A major criticism of existing child care arrangements in the participating countries is that they are not sufficiently flexible since many lone parents on welfare often obtain low-paying jobs in sales and services, which frequently require work in the evening or on weekends.

It is also crucial to ensure that there are **financial benefits** accruing from work for lone parents. The problems of making the transition into work from benefits and concerns whether work will provide them with sufficient income to manage can affect their willingness to integrate into the labour market. Another significant barrier in the Host country is housing, and in particular housing costs. Loss of housing benefits or other benefits may result in a 'benefit trap'. In some of the peer countries represented this was less of an issue, either because benefit payments were generally so low that they would not provide a disincentive to working or because many benefits could be retained in work and only tapered away slowly (over time and with increasing income). Clearly, regardless at which point the cut off level of benefits is set, there is always likely to be an element of a "benefits trap". The main issue which was highlighted by many participants was the importance of the goal of lifting lone parents out of poverty and therefore ensuring that work was of sufficient quality and adequately remunerated to achieve this.

Employers' attitudes toward lone parents can be a barrier, the feeling that employers lack flexibility and consider lone parents to be less reliable as they fear they are more likely to need to stay at home when a child is sick.. There are examples in several countries of employment subsidies for employers who employ certain target groups, including lone parents. In some countries, these subsidised measures, particularly when coupled with in-

work training (such as in Belgium) can be very successful in ensuring sustainable job creation. In other countries, however, such subsidies are not always an effective use of resources, e.g. in Germany, there is evidence of deadweight effects. It is also very important to ensure that flexible work opportunities that fit lone parents' skills, aspirations and family commitments are available and that affordable quality childcare is accessible. The development of family-friendly policies is an important issue for social partners and has also been addressed with the use of European Social Fund (ESF) measures in several countries.

For many lone parents, their **lack of work experience, skills and qualifications** can lead them to a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence in what they have to offer make them much less likely to consider employment. Most of the initiatives for lone parents offer advice and opportunities to access training. There is a certain dichotomy in different Member States between a "work first" or a "train first" approach, with the host country firmly falling into the first category. The advantages of work first can be to offer individual an income and work experience immediately, which can then lead them on to potentially higher quality employment in future. However, evidence has shown that particularly for low skilled individuals entering low skilled jobs, this is often coupled with low salaries and a lack of access to training and development opportunities, thus perpetuating disadvantage. A "work with training" approach has therefore proven successful in a number of countries. The Host Country experience appears to point to a lack of success with training measures leading to employment, but it was not clear as part of the evaluation why this was the case. Some peer countries emphasised that the crisis might provide an opportunity to shift from "work first" to "train first" or work with training in order to boost long-term employment opportunities and sustainability.

There can be as well some **personal circumstances**, such as caring responsibilities for dependents or other members of the family and lone parents' own health issues, in particular with reference to depression.

In the UK, some **cultural factors** have also been identified, as stated in the Host Country paper, where for example a dependency culture had arisen as a consequence of inter-generational worklessness within the family.

In the context of the multiple challenges facing lone parents, it was emphasised that it is often as important to measure "distance travelled" towards the labour market that it is to measure direct employment outcomes. However, in doing so, it is important to ensure that individuals are not continuously "recycled" in different active labour market policy schemes without ever increasing their likelihood of obtaining sustainable employment.

c. The need for tailor-made and personalised approaches

The starting point of the discussion was the general consensus that, there is no '*one size fits all*' approach for this target group given the heterogeneous nature of lone parents and their circumstances; they vary greatly in the extent to which they encounter barriers to work. This suggests that it may be less effective to target resources on lone parents per se, but instead to tackle the underlying problems that they encounter. Effective interventions need to be multi-faceted, taking into account the complexity of their needs and their interests for the future, in order to maintain their engagement and motivation.

Specialised training was considered important to uncover hidden barriers and ask probing questions. Experience shows that providing such services up front leads to lower drop out rates from programmes job seekers are referred to. It is certainly important to always see the same advisor to avoid having to repeat information and to establish a relationship of trust.

It was understood that there are many target groups which could benefit from specifically trained advisors. This could be addressed by establishing case teams which can meet to discuss individual cases and bring their specific expertise to bear.

The personalised approach (*'talking with, not at clients'*) is a positive aspect to consider. The host country particularly emphasised barriers against seeking advice from statutory services, as there is a concern that benefits will be removed (when in fact most individuals are not claiming all the benefits they are entitled to). There are psychological barriers to work for lone parents and the personalised approach, together with the BOC, would help to overcome these barriers.

A client-centred approach is critical, with individually tailored help and support that can address different sets of multiple needs through a one stop shop. Having personal advisers who help individuals understand what services and benefits are available and who can negotiate access to a range of options has been successful in developing a more client-centred approach.

User involvement in the design and delivery of services, and closer working with voluntary and community groups can help make them more relevant. Increased decentralisations and delegation gives service providers the flexibility to design and develop services around local needs. Services need to be accessible at times and locations that lone parents can make and they need to be culturally appropriate and free of stigma.

d. Financial measures

Most of the countries have a different starting base on benefit provision than the UK and Ireland. In Northern Ireland, unemployment benefit and income support for lone parents are paid for an indefinite period. In most other peer countries, there is a limit to the duration of benefit. Therefore there appears to be no risk of benefit trap as benefits tend to be time-limited or low, acting as an incentive to work. In some countries such as Greece, for example, it is expected that the wider family will support lone parents.

In the Republic of Ireland, although it has an income disregard, a trap always remains at some point. The main concern in Ireland tends to be about the withdrawal of housing benefit. The PES offer a free money advice bureau which claimants can get reassurance about which benefits they could keep for how long when they start working.

In countries such as Cyprus, benefits are withdrawn very gradually and there are certain benefits which can be kept by lone parents even when they taken up working to ease the transition from inactivity to work.

In Northern Ireland, the change in rules from October 2010 could be a concern, but benefits will not be withdrawn from people who cannot find childcare. In any case, this concern is dwarfed by the problems caused by the significant increase in unemployment in the last year. The PES recruited an additional 130 advisors but need as many more to match the rise in unemployment. However the Minister now wishes to fix the number of new recruitments which is making this difficult. Targeting activation is the most important goal and by implementing the changes even in a difficult economic environment a long-term goal of moving people off benefit dependency is being targeted.

Financial incentives, such as the Return-to-Work Credit (RTWC) in Northern Ireland can minimise the occurrence of a 'benefit trap' for most clients. As indicated in the Host Country, most lone parents moving into employment were in receipt of RTWC. The high percentage of take-up suggests that this component was a positive incentive for parents to go back to employment. When comparing benefit levels in Northern Ireland (parity UK wide) to take-

home wages in Northern Ireland (80% of private sector wages in the UK) the rationale for the inclusion of a £40 (€45) per week incentive is evident, especially as most lone parents moved into part-time work on minimum wage. In Northern Ireland, the RTWC was set high enough to '*tip the financial balance in favour of work*' for many lone parents and is simple and transparent enough to comprehend as opposed to the complexity of the tax credits regime.

Although during a recession it might be difficult to grant these financial incentives, they become efficient tools in motivating clients to consider work. It was acknowledge that activation of lone parents may require an investment, but it is a positive investment, with several indirect benefits, such as breaking the cycle of worklessness across generations). Lone parents and their children are at significant risk of poverty and policy must be careful not to aggravate this situation.

e. Partnership arrangements

The Peer Countries agreed that the complex nature of the problems faced by lone parents requires 'joined-up' approaches and partnerships with local authorities, community organisations, industry and other agencies. Effective partnerships often include a mixture of government agencies, local authorities, NGOs, community organisations, industry and volunteer groups. All major stakeholders including the lone parents themselves need to be involved in the design and delivery of any solutions.

In Germany, the local Jobcentres ("Arbeitsgemeinschaften") are jointly managed by the PES and the local authorities and responsible for providing not only means-tested benefits but also for reintegration services to all employable social assistance beneficiaries, including social services provided by the local authorities. The Jobcentres are established on the basis of a formal agreement between the local authority and the local PES, with a clear division of responsibilities between them. The PES is responsible for the financing and implementation of labour market measures and for the administration of income support benefits, while the social agency of the local authority is responsible in particular for the provision of supportive social services such as childcare, debt counselling, socio-psychological counselling and drug counselling as well as housing subsidies. The Jobcentres are required by law to provide a personal counsellor and to conclude a reintegration agreement with each client. The details of the work process and service delivery are largely determined at local level. The principal goal of the reform was to provide a one-stop-shop for municipal social and PES labour market services for clients many of which have complex needs and multiple labour market problems. Lone parents on social assistance should benefit especially from this reform, since they gain access to work-oriented labour market services.⁵

In Northern Ireland, the government (statutory agencies) label can cause a significant disadvantage with lone parents feeling that their benefits will be policed and they may have entitlements taken away from them (when the fact is that most benefit claimants do not claim all the benefits they are entitled to). There is a strong reluctance to engage with government agencies, instead people consult community representatives to get assurance that it is OK to access centrally provided services and benefits. In addition, there is a stigma attached to claiming statutory services. For the LEMIS initiative, it was therefore best not to see the Department's "fingerprints" at all. When individuals from the Department do go out to meet community representatives it is best to send individuals who grew up in the same neighbourhood to create a connection with the respective community.

⁵ Hugh Mosley , Peer Comment Paper Germany : '*Labour Market Policy for Lone Parents in Germany*', April 2010

In Belgium, partnership approaches are used to engage with other target groups such as ethnic minorities, but not with lone parents. Such initiatives use individuals and representatives from the relevant communities to engage the target group. Sometimes the PES use outsourcing arrangements with NGOs and private sector bodies to provide some of these outreach initiatives. In term of PES intervention, the Flemish PES use profiling and skills assessment which then automatically matches individuals with vacancies. If this only creates few matches, meetings are arranged to carry out more intensive matching and provide additional services.

In Romania the main partnership is with employers and the PES. Lone parents do not have such significant issues as childcare is provided and is free for 4 hours a day and only attracts a small fee for further hours. Employers are incentivised to recruit lone parents through the payment of subsidies. In addition, it may be useful to consider introducing incentives for mothers to return to work earlier (currently they can receive 80% of salary for 2 years while on maternity/parental leave). There is no benefit trap, as such, as benefits are low and can be received while in work as well. There is little reticence among employers to hire lone parents, but a lack of skills is a more important issue. The recession has caused problems for lower skilled workers as employers now have a pool of skilled workers available even to do unskilled jobs.

In Cyprus, employers are often reluctant to recruit lone parents because they fear that if a child is sick the mother will take time off. This is why significant financial incentives are provided to encourage the recruitment of lone parents. The PES in Cyprus do not work directly with NGOs, but they work with welfare services who do work with NGOs.

f. Importance of monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation of programmes track what is being done and whether the programme is making a difference. As public budgets become stretched, careful monitoring and evaluation is needed to underpin investment in different programmes. This is even more relevant in times of crisis where findings from evaluations could help shifting money elsewhere if programmes are not showing the desirable impact. A challenge for this type of initiatives is to develop robust monitoring systems to follow the individual's progression after their participation in the programme. More studies and evaluations are needed to provide the evidence to underpin the investment in this type of measure.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Overall the critical success factors for this type of interventions include: the tailor-made character that focus on the needs of the individual, 'not one size fits all' mentality and a holistic approach needed to address the multiple disadvantages faced by many lone parents.

The main conclusions of the discussions are summarised under the following headings:

Effective partnership working: The Peer Countries agreed that the complex nature of the problems faced by lone parents requires 'joined-up' approaches and partnerships with statutory agencies, local authorities, NGOs, community organisations, industry and volunteer groups. Such an approach is more likely to improve reach and to prevent lone parents from missing out on support appropriate to their needs due to lack of coordination across the range of support services offered. Understanding the local context is essential to facilitate this process. This partnership approach is also seen as key to overcome client resistance to engaging with statutory services.

Targeted approach Vs Mainstream approach: Most countries do not have an approach which targets lone parents specifically. However, many peer countries expressed a strong interest in the benefits of such an approach. These include the possibility to provide Employment Advisors in the Public Employment Services with specific training not only on the counselling and inter-personal skills required to help gain the necessary trust and co-operation of a target group which has in many cases been out of the labour market for a very long time, but also with enhanced training on all the support services available to lone parents (from advice on childcare services, to mental health advice and details of housing and other relevant benefits). In addition, a targeted approach was also seen as allowing for the development of specific measures which had the needs of lone parents in mind, such as training provision which includes the offer of childcare facilities. However, a number of disbenefits or drawbacks of a targeted approach were also identified. These included the possibility of stigmatising lone parents, but mainly revolved around the question of how to select the most vulnerable groups to have access to such services in the context of scarce resources. The question was also raised whether a targeted approach could indeed detract from a move, which has been evident among most EU Public Employment Services in recent years, towards individual action planning which clearly assesses and acts upon the needs of each client.

Making work pay: The existence of a benefit trap is dependent on the benefit regime. In the UK, the provision of in-work tax credits and one-off financial incentives have been shown to be essential to tip the financial balance in favour of work for many lone parents. Tools such as the 'Better-off calculation' seem effective in demonstrating to lone parents the financial consequences of their different employment options and help in making benefit regimes more transparent. However there are other costs associated with working (e.g. childcare) that can act as a disincentive for the lone parent.

Importance of frontline staff: It was agreed that the key to effective intervention was to be found in ensuring Employment Advisors are highly skilled and receive ongoing training; a caseload approach ensuring that each client sees the same advisor each time and the maintenance of a ratio between advisors and clients which allows for a personalised and effective service. It was acknowledged that as a result of the crisis and the stringency of public budgets these best practice goals were increasingly difficult to achieve.

Individualised pathways and performance measurement: In terms of the most suitable pathways for lone parents it is most important to acknowledge that lone parents are not a homogenous group. Therefore an initial assessment of needs is key to develop an appropriate personal action plan. Particularly individuals who have been out of the labour market for some time often face barriers which go way beyond the need to update skills to

boost employability. It is therefore critical to accept that it is as relevant to measure 'distance travelled' (in overcoming obstacles to entering the labour market) as it is to measure shorter-term employment outcomes. In doing so, it is necessary to ensure that clients are not endlessly recycled through the system but follow a meaningful and individualised activation pathway, which can range from confidence building and measures to address non-skilled related obstacles, to activation to training and (subsidised) work placements or employment.

Role of social partners: A general lack of family friendly working arrangements not only hinders lone parent's access to employment, but also serves to undermine gender equality in the labour market as a whole. It could be argued that in countries with strong childcare arrangements, employer reluctance to recruit women with children (including lone parents) is lower, but on the basis of the sample of countries present at the peer review it is difficult to assess whether this is a linear relationship. Social partners clearly have an important role to play in supporting family friendly working arrangements. Ease of return to the labour market is also significantly influenced by leave arrangements and other labour market parameters.

Quality and affordability of childcare provision: Many countries fail to meet the Barcelona targets of offering childcare facilities to a third of 0-3 year olds. Even where childcare facilities are available, accessibility, flexibility and cost remain key factors restricting access to employment for women. In the wider societal context, the distribution of caring and other domestic roles clearly also remains an issue to be addressed and the structure of leave arrangements can have an important function in this regard.