

Work-Life Balance in a Low-Income Neighbourhood

Hartley Dean
Alice Coulter

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Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
CASE enquiries – tel: 020 7955 6679

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Telephone: UK+20 7955 6679
Fax: UK+20 7955 6951
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Editorial Note and Acknowledgements

Hartley Dean is Reader in Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Alice Coulter, who was previously Research Officer in the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion at the London School of Economics, is now Research Executive at the British Market Research Bureau (BMRB). The paper is based on preliminary findings from a study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, under Award Ref: RES-000-22-1491, whose support is gratefully acknowledged. It is adapted from an earlier report, which was presented on 20 September 2006 at a consultation meeting with residents and relevant service providers in the South London neighbourhood where the study had been carried out. We shall call that neighbourhood by the pseudonym, Pride Fields. The relatively informal language in which the earlier version of the report had been presented has for the most part been retained. However, some academic references and background notes have been added, together with some additional commentary based on the valuable observations made during the consultation meeting. The authors are grateful to the several community representatives and local service providers who facilitated the study, to all those residents of Pride Fields who participated in the study and to Howard Glennerster for helpful comments.

Abstract

‘Work-life balance’ generally refers to how people may combine paid employment with family responsibilities. The UK government’s attempts to promote work-life balance are connected to wider concerns to maximise labour-force participation and include policies on tax credits, child care and employment rights. Employers favour work-life balance if it promotes the flexibility of labour supply and enables them to retain valued staff. There are concerns about the extent to which work-life balance policies benefit lower-income groups. This paper reports findings from a study, based on in-depth interviews with 42 economically active parents from a low-income neighbourhood. Participants supported the idea of work-life balance, but many found it difficult to achieve. Stress and long hours are unavoidable in some jobs, or else income and prospects must be forgone in order to obtain ‘family-friendly’ working conditions. Employment rights are poorly understood. Standards of management at work are inconsistent. Pay levels are insufficient and, though benefits/tax credits help, they are complex and badly administered. Childcare provision is available, but quality and access is uneven. Participants had mixed views as to the efficacy of support and services available in the neighbourhood. Participants offered different accounts of their experiences depending upon whether they were having to put their work first or family life first, and whether they felt ambivalent or content about this. The clearest finding was that participants tended to be fundamentally disempowered - by the unpredictability of the labour market, the dominance of a ‘business case’ rationale, their lack of confidence in childcare provision and a lack of belief in their employment and benefit rights.

JEL classification: I38, J22, J40

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Corresponding author: Hartley Dean (email: h.dean@lse.ac.uk; tel: 020 7955 6184)

1. Background

Work-life balance is a big issue at present. But the expression, ‘work-life balance’, may mean different things to different people. The purpose of the study we are reporting was to see what the expression might mean to the people on the Pride Fields estate. To start with, however, we should try and explain - first, what the government means by work-life balance; and second, what employers seem to think it means.

The government thinks work-life balance is primarily about how to make it easier for as many of us as possible to combine paid employment with our ordinary family lives¹. Its concern is partly to do with the global changes that are affecting the way we live. Countries like Britain are experiencing big changes in the way the labour market works, in the way that households function and in the age-mix of the population². The government believes that one way or another we have got to get more of the working age population into jobs, even if these are low-paid or part-time jobs. The government’s other concern is with combating poverty and disadvantage through ‘welfare-to-work’. This means:

- New Deal schemes that get people off benefits and into jobs or training;
- Making work pay, through a National Minimum Wage and Tax Credits;
- A National Child Care Strategy and initiatives like Sure Start;
- Promoting parental leave and ‘family-friendly’ employment practices.

Employers on the other hand tend to think that work-life balance is about how to get the best out of their work-force. In a very competitive economic environment employers would like workers to be ‘flexible’ (which may entail part-time or irregular working hours) and plentiful (because this helps keep wages low). They therefore welcome anything the government can do that helps workers juggle their lives around their jobs or that enables people who might not otherwise have been able to work to do so. But also, there may be certain employees that employers are especially keen to hang on to (for example, because they are highly trained or have special skills that are much in demand) and if this means allowing certain employees to work flexible hours or subsidising their childcare costs then there is a ‘business case’ for doing so. For

¹ This concern has been expressed by the UK’s New Labour Government in a variety of official documents, including *Supporting Families*, The Home Office, 1998; *Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice*, Department of Trade and Industry, 2000; and *Work and Families: Choice and Flexibility*, Department of Trade and Industry, 2005.

² It has been predicted that it may be changes in the household economy that will have the greatest impact on the future trajectory of the welfare state: see Esping-Andersen, G. (1999) *The Social Foundations of Post-Industrial Economies*, Oxford University Press. The evidence indicates that households’ strategies are already evolving to adapt to more flexible working patterns: see, for example, Harkness, S. (2003) ‘The household division of labour’, in R. Dickens et al. *The Labour Market under New Labour*, Palgrave.

employers, therefore, work-life balance may mean special perks for highly skilled and highly valued staff members, but it represents a rather different concern so far as less highly skilled and more expendable workers are concerned³.

A lot of academic research has already been done to investigate the ways in which people are adapting to more flexible working patterns. What is more, a survey conducted for the government appears to show that 87 per cent of British workers are satisfied with their working arrangements⁴. But no-one has really troubled to find out what (if anything) people understand by, or expect from, ‘work-life balance’. In particular, we were concerned to find out what people living in a relatively low-income neighbourhood understand or expect. It had occurred to us:

- If employers in such neighbourhoods are able to pick and choose when and to whom they will be ‘family-friendly’ what kind of control over people’s lives might this give them?
- While childcare provision across the country has been improving, do parents always value the kind of childcare that is available?
- How well do people understand the employment and benefit rights through which they are supposed achieve their work-life balance?

We chose to do this study in Pride Fields, not because everybody there is poor or deprived, but because the characteristics of the population mean that incomes are likely to be lower than the national average. See Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Pride Fields compared with England & Wales (modelled on the basis of 2001 Census data) %

	Employment rate	Households with dependent children	Lone parent households	Households in social housing	BME households
Pride Fields	49	46	23	84	64
England & Wales	61	30	7	19	8

We wanted to see whether, in a community such as this, it would be possible to get people to identify the things that would make for a better work-life balance and perhaps even to set some identifiable benchmarks by which to measure progress towards a better work-life balance in the future.

³ See Dean, H. (2002) ‘Business versus families: Whose side is New Labour on?’, *Social Policy and Society*, 1(1)

⁴ Hooker, H. et al. (2006) *The Third Work-Life Balance Employees’ Survey*. Employment Relations Research Series No. 58, DTI. The study was based on a telephone interviews with a random sample of working-age employees.

2. The study

One-to-one interviews were used to gather information and explore people's experiences and aspirations about combining work and family life. Interviews were confidential and subsequently anonymised to ensure that participants were able to be as frank as possible without worrying about being identified. All participants quoted in this report have been given pseudonyms and any identifying data have been changed.

Before interviewing began we consulted several organisations in the neighbourhood about the content of the interview schedule. We also conducted five pilot interviews with working parents, whereby participants were encouraged to feedback on specific questions and potential gaps in the survey. The structure of the interview schedule that evolved from this process was in three sections: the first section covered basic background information about the household; the second section provided an opportunity for participants to talk about their experiences of education, work, benefits and childcare, among other things; and the third section asked participants to evaluate the relative importance and effectiveness of various services and facilities in the area, as well as asking them to think of ways they could be improved.

The pilot interviews identified some limitations with the third section. In contrast to their ability to talk about their experiences of facilities and policy measures, some participants had difficulty applying a simple evaluative scale. In some instances their evaluations clearly were not based on their experiences or else they even contradicted what the participant had already told us. We can only infer that this was partly because some participants found the abstract nature of the scoring process intuitively alien, or else because - out of feelings of loyalty or deference - they were reluctant to record their criticisms in such a defined and formal manner⁵. We continued using the third section, though not pushing participants to use a scale for evaluation where this seemed problematic. This part of the interview was still valuable, because it prompted participants to think and talk about the full range of facilities and services available to them and, sometimes, to clarify what they had already said.

Interviewees were initially found through community organisations and contacts from previous research projects. These interviewees were then asked to recommend a friend or neighbour to take part in the study. The aim was to reach as many people as possible through this method of 'snowballing' to maximise trust and encourage frank responses. However, it can be a slow process and has the potential for limiting the range of interviewees. Therefore we also adopted other methods, including attending community events and leafleting through local schools and nurseries.

⁵ The original intention had been to use a simple Likert Scale to calibrate participants' support for different kinds of service or measure. That not everyone could readily or meaningfully do this is in itself an interesting and important methodological finding, but it did mean that we were obliged to re-think our approach.

In total 47 individuals were interviewed, including two couples who were interviewed together though we tried, as far as possible, to draw out individual responses. Of the 47 interviews, five were subsequently discounted to ensure that the sample of responses was made up of economically active working families.

Of the 42 individuals included in our sample, 35 were women. The majority were of 'non-white' ethnicity, and only ten (24%) considered themselves to be 'white British'. There were equal numbers of lone-parents and couples. Two participants described themselves as disabled and two more mentioned other health complaints. In total, 12 participants described someone in their household as having a disability or other health problem. Fifteen participants worked in the public sector, compared to eight in the private sector, nine in the voluntary and community sector and four were self-employed. Six participants were currently unemployed, though considered economically active as they are actively searching for jobs. The families ranged in size and age, with the majority made up of two children, and one-third of families had at least one child under school age. Most, but not all, participants were living on relatively low incomes (and even those with higher household incomes were generally in quite straitened circumstances when their financial liabilities were taken into account).

An essential part of the study has been a consultation meeting which was held on Pride Fields on 20 September 2006 to which local residents and service providers were invited, and at which an earlier version of this preliminary findings report was presented. Elements of the feedback from that consultation have been incorporated in this version of the report.

3. The findings

The 42 in-depth interviews produced a wealth of information about people's different experiences and aspirations in relation to work-life balance. This section is a summary of the main findings, not an attempt to cover in detail the full range of responses or analyse in detail what this all means. It is intended as a speculative account of people's attitudes and experiences to provoke further discussion.

For the purpose of this initial report we focus on two broad issues. On the one hand, we explored with participants if they felt able to adjust their work to fit with their life or whether they were having to adjust their life to fit around their work. On the other, we explored how satisfied or content people were with the situation in which they found themselves.

Most participants felt they should be able to achieve a work-life balance with work accommodating family responsibilities.

"Most jobs should be able to accommodate your life because you've got kids. It's like they're saying don't have kids, just live for work and nothing else. It's not supposed to be that way." (Hazel)

Others were more pragmatic about the realities of combining work and family life, acknowledging that sacrifices have to be made, often in relation to time spent with the family, and whether or not it's something people are happy to do.

"I don't get to spend that much time with [my kids], so it's not really ideal, but... it's one or the other. You have to decide which is more important to you, either spending all the time with the children and not being able to manage, or go to work and have little time with them."
(Maria)

Across the range of interviews, several factors emerged as important determinants of people's ability to reach a personally satisfactory work-life balance⁶.

Nature of work

Several participants referred to the nature of their job or the industry in which they worked as one of the main factors affecting how they manage to combine work and family life. Stress and long hours at work are associated with having less time at home, but are often accepted as "unavoidable" and "inevitable" given the requirements of certain jobs and industries.

"I don't know any flexible work in the building trade" (Rodney)

Others were less accepting of the situation, but equally resigned to the inevitability of it.

"I should be able to finish at the dot of 5 o'clock and go home and forget all about my job... But it would never happen with my job 'cos it's the nature of it." (Chantelle)

Some participants, all of whom are mothers, actively sought jobs that were in their nature less stressful and better suited to fit with their home life.

"The job I had before was very stressful... I didn't want to do that with two kids, but it wasn't possible for me not to do that in my old job cos I'd always done it. So I decided to look for another job while I was on maternity leave." (Audrey)

Yet participants acknowledged that to achieve this balance they were often required to sacrifice greater income and/or career progression.

"Do you sacrifice your being able to adjust and being able to accommodate your job around your time, or do you go for more money

⁶ In addition to the issues explored in this report, several participants identified some very practical and relevant local issues to do with local transport links and shopping facilities on Pride Fields.

and have less time with your kids? For now I choose to get less money but get more quality time with my kids.” (Leslie)

Employment practices

Closely linked to people’s perceptions of the nature of their work are the employment practices adopted by employers. For many participants, key practices cited in relation to achieving a work-life balance were flexible working patterns and parental leave. Flexibility to accommodate childcare provision and child illnesses is crucial for many parents.

“I told them before I started that I have responsibilities and [my employers] are quite good when it comes to things like that. They’re quite flexible.” (Michelle)

Childcare issues made certain practices, like the Right to Request Flexible Working crucial for some parents.

“I told them the childminder’s leaving now so I need to change my hours... They had no choice because I said to them, sorry, it’s either that or I have to leave.” (Hazel)

However, people’s ability to make best use of such practices as employers are required to follow was limited by their awareness of what they are entitled to.

“I only found out about [parental leave] sort of after being here for a year and a half.” (Aimee)

It was also limited by their confidence in asking for these entitlements.

“I don’t really want to be doing things like that, making a fuss. I just get on and do my work.” (Aimee)

People were also put off by perceived limitations of the practices themselves, such as complicated arrangement procedures or impractical conditions.

“You’re entitled to a certain amount of parental days, but of course they’re unpaid. When you’re on the fringes of borderline poverty, it’s not something I particularly want to take, are unpaid days.” (Kevin)

“I’ve had a few problems when I’ve been called to pick up my son when he’s had hay fever, which completely disgusted me. And yeah, my current line manager is a bit off about that as well. I’ve never taken any special leave or anything like that. It’s not.... It’s not worth asking for it.” (Ruth)

A general lack of certainty about entitlement to specific employment rights and practices, together with the perceived limitations noted above, act to reduce the significance of so-called ‘family-friendly’ practices.

“I don’t think the flexible working regulations actually make much difference to people, cos all you have is the right to ask to change your hours or, you know, to work at a different time, change your shift. It’s just the right to request it. Unless the employees have more rights in respect of it then there isn’t, it’s not going to work.” (Audrey)

Managers

A common factor in people’s assessment of whether they were able to adapt work to fit around caring responsibilities was whether or not they had an ‘understanding’ manager. Even employees of companies with ‘family-friendly’ working practices noted that the extent to which they are able to benefit from these practices is ultimately dependent on their manager. For those with understanding managers this can be a positive experience.

“There is [formal leave] but essentially it’s at the discretion of your manager. But again you know, they’re very supportive and very flexible but I think that is because I do put in more hours as well. So it works both ways.” (Holly)

For others, management acts as an obstacle, deterring people from requesting entitlements.

“There is special leave however it’s got to go to the head person and it depends on what he deems as important. It’s not worth applying for it.” (Sarah)

Several people mentioned that they felt ‘lucky’ to have a supportive manager, and that this was often because the manager themselves had children and therefore understood the pressures of being a working parent. In contrast, managers without children were viewed as lacking empathy.

“I think probably because [my boss] doesn’t have any children, I think when it comes to like explaining that you can’t come in because your children are not well, she’s not really that flexible, so sometimes it can be a bit hard. You feel a bit guilty sometimes when you don’t go in.” (Maria)

Participants were able to compare their current situation with previous experiences of managers, both better and worse, sometimes within the same company.

“We’ve got new managers coming in now. They’re trying to do new rules. At the moment in my mind it’s like, ‘I want to get out of there’... They make up their own rules as far as I’m concerned, which I think is wrong” (Hazel)

This underlined the importance of management in determining employees' chances of benefiting from family-friendly working practices.

"It's very hit and miss with us. It does really depend what department you're in." (Ruth)

Income

When we asked parents about their ideal job, the majority of parents told us they would prefer to work fewer hours and to spend more time at home.

"Ideally what I would do is probably do less hours at work so that I could take my daughter to school and pick her up." (Maria)

All acknowledged that fewer hours would mean a cut in pay, but few were prepared to accept this.

"There are times when I think 'Oh God, I wish I could pack it in and do part-time'. But then, because you've sort of got used to that money, and like I said there's only the one wage coming in, you sort of think well it's tough but I've got to do it anyway." (Jessica)

Some parents were driven to working overtime and anti-social hours to make ends meet.

"I'm working Saturdays and Sundays but it's the time for my children and it's very hard because it's the time for being a family. But I need to sacrifice that part as well for the reason I told you, to meet my obligations." (Carmen)

Although one mother explained that working overtime, while necessary to compensate for low pay, had caused problems with the benefits she was claiming.

"They're gonna say they overpay [my tax credits]. And that's not fair. How can that be fair? And I said to them once, the reason why I do it is because when you get your wages it's not enough, so you do a bit of overtime to have a little extra money." (Jocelyn)

Many people spoke about the importance of benefits, and particularly Tax Credits, in improving their financial situation. Yet widespread problems with overpayments had put some off applying.

"I heard about this Family Tax Credit and people owing them instead of them giving this nice means of money and it doesn't work out and they have to end up paying all these debts back. I don't think I want to get involved in that. No thanks." (Hazel)

For those who had benefited, Tax Credits were seen as compensation for low pay and made part-time work a more attractive option.

“I wouldn’t be able to survive without benefits, not on the wages I get. If I didn’t have the Working Tax and the Child Tax and my family allowance I’d be stuck. It wouldn’t be worth my while working at all.”

(Olivia)

For others, they acted as a disincentive to working longer hours or going for promotion.

“They’ve asked me if I’d wanted the post, but I mean, em, I work twenty hours, this is for twenty-five hours. And it’s not much money more than what I’m getting now, with the benefits I get from the working family tax credit. It’s not worth my while.” (Rachel)

Childcare

We asked parents about their ideal form of childcare and the most common response was themselves. As noted above, many of the parents we spoke to would prefer to work fewer hours and be able to collect their children from school themselves.

“I’d love to be able to leave work earlier and pick my kids up from school, and spend more than 2 hours with them. I mean, I’ve got an awful habit of letting them stay up late because you know, just to spend some time with them.” (Ruth)

As most parents aren’t able or willing to survive on a reduced income from cutting back on work, childcare is crucial to how they manage work and family.

“If I had my preference, I’d look after him. I don’t like the fact that I have to pay someone to look after my child. Do you know what I mean? But I’ve got no choice in that matter. So I do need an after care provision. So, we’ll just have to find a good one, which I’ve now found.”

(Melanie)

For some parents, difficulty accessing suitable childcare drove decisions about working.

“I deliberately went part-time and worked for [a new employer]. That was in consideration of spending more time at home with the children. Had the [childcare] option been there I probably would’ve stayed there full-time.” (Anna)

For others, suitable childcare options were simply not there.

“When I started this job, I did start looking for sort of childminders... mainly that was finance and they only work up until six o’clock and I

was working until ten. It wasn't too viable at the time so I said no."
(Aimee)

As a result, this mum, along with several others for whom suitable childcare wasn't available, makes use of an older sibling to care for the younger kids while they work. All were worried about the pressure this placed on them.

"He's only 13, do you know what I mean, and he's picking up his brother, he's cooking the dinner. He's got to do this and do that. I'll phone him up and give him instructions while I'm at work and it's a lot of responsibility for a 13 year old to do. I just feel so guilty sometimes."
(Caroline)

Tax Credits, for those who make use of them, appear to have made formal childcare more accessible.

"There's help with childcare now but back then I just had to stay at home with my kids. If I'd had help I would have liked to go back to work before." (Nicole)

Yet criteria on which the Tax Credits are calculated limits parents' childcare options by only contributing towards costs for formal registered childcare.

"There's a lady next door. She was going to look after him but she's not registered. I mean it's nice, I know her. I've known her for a while. But I still couldn't afford it cos she's not registered so I wouldn't get any help. It would be easier but there wouldn't be any help for me." (Faith)

This lack of flexibility has caused problems for some mothers.

"In an ideal world people like my friend and grandmothers and people who look after children for you, I think that should be recognised and credits awarded to pay or help you pay for that childcare. I don't see why we should be told who should look after our children." (Caroline)

A big worry for many working parents is childcare during the holidays, particularly the long summer holidays. Most parents said they wanted their children to be occupied with organised activities during this time.

"For me it's essential, absolutely essential to have play schemes during the school holidays, you know, not just because I'm reliant on it because of not having anybody at home to look after my son, it's not so much that, but it's also because you want your child to be active." (Holly)

There are holiday play schemes organised in the area, which are considered "brilliant" by some parents. However their hours and costs are not ideal for all families we spoke to.

“There’s one really cheap play scheme they run on the estate, but it only runs for 3 weeks during the summer and their hours are not friendly for working people.” (Ruth)

“It’s too dear. It’d be alright if I had one child but when I’ve got two kids that wants to go it all adds up doesn’t it. It’s like a lot of money.” (Katherine)

Some parents are able to make use of tax credits to contribute towards the costs of holiday childcare, but this also has limitations.

“Even though I know I get help towards [holiday childcare] to me they’re not offering enough for me to be paying £80, even if I was getting help.” (Michelle)

Evaluation of services and facilities

Because of time constraints the third and final section of the interviews dealt with a limited range of specific services, organisations and policy measures. As mentioned previously, attempts to calibrate the degree of support for different kinds of intervention turned out to be a less than wholly effective. In some cases (about a third) responses could only be inferred from discussion rather than systematically recorded. As a result, the data that emerged are insufficiently robust for the purposes of any kind of quantitative analysis. Additionally, many participants found it difficult, or even impossible, to say just how their current situation could practicably be improved. Nonetheless, coupled with feedback from our consultation meeting with the residents they provide an important indication of people’s views about particular services and policy measures.

We first asked participants to name some of the services they knew and used in relation to specific areas: information and advice; finance and benefits; healthcare; training; childcare; adult care; and, employment practices. Using flashcards we then checked these against a list of services or measures available and tried to get participants to evaluate their importance and effectiveness. Each of the areas will be considered individually below.

1. Information and advice

The most well known organisations providing information and advice were the local Job Centre and Citizen’s Advice Bureau - though neither is that easily accessible from Pride Fields. A lot of participants also mentioned visiting government websites for information. About half the people interviewed knew about the One Stop Shop, based on the estate, though only about a quarter had used it.⁷ Despite widespread concerns about long queues and the difficulty of

⁷ The Pride Fields One Stop Shop has been funded as part of a neighbourhood management initiative under Strategic Partnership arrangements, but is about to be re-organised and re-located.

getting seen at the local CAB, it came out as being more important and more effective than other options, though this was closely followed by information from government websites. It is clear, however, that people need more than just raw information in order to make sense of the range of facilities and entitlements available to them.

2. *Finance and benefits*

The most commonly identified income maintenance benefits were Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit, followed by Child Benefit, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and maintenance payments. Child Benefit, which was the most widely claimed benefit though it required prompting for participants to remember it. Child Tax Credit and Child Benefit were considered more important and effective by far than the other benefits mentioned. The ability of participants to evaluate the financial assistance that is available was drastically impaired by the difficulties they experienced understanding the systems entailed. As has already been seen, there is considerable dissatisfaction with the administration of benefits and tax credits and it is evident that some participants have been deterred from claiming.

3. *Healthcare*

Nobody required prompting about GP services and almost everyone made use of them. Other services including dentists, hospitals, health visitors and drop-in clinics were also mentioned, though to a lesser degree. While all health services were considered either quite or very important, GP services were considered less satisfactory than other options, with consistent complaints about the difficulty of obtaining appointments at the practice based on the estate itself. Given the importance of ready access to primary healthcare to those who juggle paid employment and caring for family members, this is perhaps a neglected feature of the debate about work-life balance, not least because in the context of the close attention some employers pay to sickness absence monitoring.

4. *Training*

About a third of participants were aware of training opportunities at the local FE College and through community education services, though almost exclusively those who had made use of them. All but a small number of the people who had a view on these services felt they were at least a good service. Fewer people were aware of Sure Start training opportunities on the estate, though again those who had made use of them were very positive.

5. *Childcare*

The majority of participants were aware of a range of childcare options, including childminders, nurseries, after-school clubs and holiday play schemes, though the most commonly used childcare was friends and family, closely followed by nurseries. The most valued and effective childcare was felt to be friends and family, followed by the local after-school club, with nurseries and childminders coming behind. Holiday play schemes were considered an

important service, though evaluated as less effective, relative to other forms of childcare, most particularly because the organization of the schemes (and information about when and where they would run) was haphazard and access to places could be difficult. There was considerable support for the introduction of a breakfast club at the local primary school.

6. *Adult care*

Very few participants were aware of adult care on the estate. This was not wholly surprising in view of the small number of participants in this particular study who were caring directly for elderly or disabled people.

7. *Employment practices/entitlements*

There was little awareness of specific employment practices, other than maternity pay and leave. A couple of participants expressed the view that statutory paid maternity leave should be extended to a year. Participants reacted when prompted, particularly in relation to paternity pay and leave, parental leave, flexitime, work from home, job-sharing and the right to request flexible working, but relatively few had made use of these entitlements. The most effective entitlement appeared to be the Right to Request Flexible Working, though this in practice depended heavily on the discretion of managers and was not consistently available. It appeared that trade unions were playing a negligible role in advancing work-life balance issues. The feeling strongly expressed at the feedback/consultation meeting was that managers need more training and monitoring in relation to work-life balance - as much in the public sector as the private sector.

Summary

People's ability to adjust their work to accommodate family life appears to have little to do with choice and more to do with chance in relation to factors such as the availability of suitable childcare and having an understanding manager who supports family-friendly employment practices. One area where choice does arise for some parents is in decisions about where to work and selecting a job according to the nature of work and number of hours. Yet this is limited by potential sacrifice of income and career progression.

People appear to be more content with their work-life balance when they have been able to adapt their job to fit around childcare, or have specifically chosen a job that enabled them to do that, or where they recognise that their current job and manager are better than previous experiences.

Results from the final part of the interviews suggest that there is patchy awareness and some confusion about people's rights, particularly in relation to employment practices and benefit entitlements. People were generally aware of the options for childcare and information and advice services, but less positive when evaluating their provision.

4. Discussion points

What we have set out here are only preliminary findings. Further analysis of the transcripts from our interviews is currently in progress. At this stage, however there are two broad issues that were explored at our feedback/consultation meeting and that will provide a focus for further analysis. The first has to do with the diversity of the people on the estate and their experiences. The second has to do with the various ways in which people on the estate are systematically disempowered. Our feeling is that these are things we have to understand before it will ever be possible to improve experiences of work-life balance in a neighbourhood such as Pride Fields.

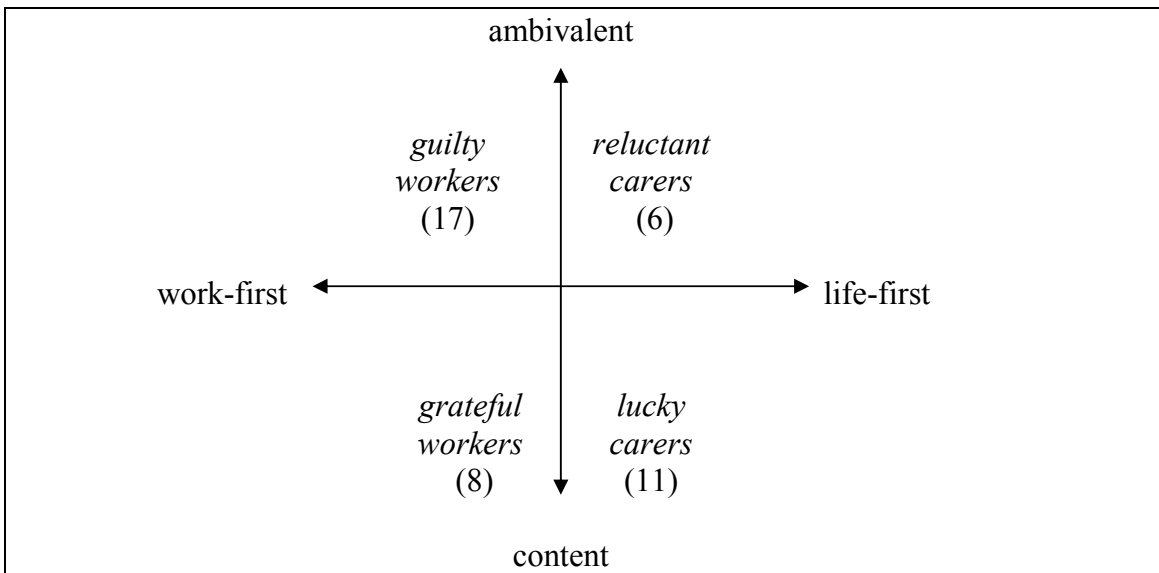
Diversity

In trying to make sense of what we have been told by those who participated in the study, it strikes us that we have heard basically four kinds of account or story, depending:

- on whether people described a situation in which they were adjusting their life to fit their work or their work to fit their life;
- on whether they seemed from what they said to be happy (or at least reasonably content) or unhappy (or perhaps ambivalent) about their situation.

We can summarise this using the diagram in Figure 1.

Figure 1: A taxonomy of discursively defined work-life balance scenarios



We are not suggesting that there are four different kinds of people, but that there are four different kinds of story to be told about work-life balance on Pride Fields Estate: ‘guilty worker’ stories; ‘reluctant carer’ stories; ‘grateful worker’ stories and ‘lucky carer’ stories. Nor are we suggesting that the stories in each category are exactly the same, because they are not. Nonetheless:

- In the guilty worker scenario, work-life balance isn't working for people. They are having to put work before family and they feel unhappy about it. Seventeen of our 42 participants described such a scenario (15 women and 2 men). Some participants expressed forthright dissatisfaction with their employers' failure to accommodate their needs. Others gave more ambiguous answers but clearly were struggling to give priority to family life in the way they would have wanted.
- In the reluctant carer scenario, people are having to care for their families when they would prefer to put more into their work. Six participants described this scenario (5 women and 1 man), all of whom were currently seeking employment.
- In the grateful worker scenario, people are putting work before family but they are grateful for the opportunity to work. Eight participants described this scenario, half of these were men. The others were women who had either gladly returned to paid employment in middle age or who, despite a certain ambiguity about their work, were especially deferent towards their employers.
- In the lucky carer scenario, people are putting family before work and feel lucky that they are able to do so. Work-life balance is working for them, but that they have achieved this is a matter of serendipity or chance, or because, fortunately, they felt able to forego income and/or career opportunities. Eleven participants described this scenario (all women). Some of these women were themselves working as childminders or as a foster parent and the others were either working under quite exemplary managers or were only working very short part-time hours.⁸

In terms of their current experiences, a majority of the participants were polarised between those experiencing a guilty worker scenario and those experiencing a lucky carer scenario. Additionally, however, despite the impression given by government sponsored survey data⁹, the qualitative data we have obtained suggest that a majority of the economically active working-age parents in a sample drawn from a low-income neighbourhood are not wholly content with the work-life balance they have achieved under their current working arrangements.

This is, of course only a model intended to assist our understanding. We recognised that people's scenarios are changing and complex. At our feedback/consultation meeting several participants emphasised that much depended on the stage people were at in their life course and in their employment careers, the ages of their children and even on how they might be feeling on any particular day of the week! It also emerged that there could be different interpretations for each type of scenario. While the guilty

⁸ In our earlier report it was said that three participants had been unable to say whether they were having to put their work first or their life first. A closer scrutiny of the relevant interview transcripts has now enabled us to assign each of these participants to one of the four groups.

⁹ See note 6 above.

worker scenario was widely recognised and reflected a stage through which many participants felt they had gone, some of the others were potentially ambiguous. The nature of the luck entailed in being a lucky carer would not necessarily be obvious at the time. The gratitude entailed in being a grateful worker might not stem from submissive satisfaction with one's employer¹⁰, but from satisfaction with one's own achievements: people may be grateful for the chance to work even when they feel (or know) they are being exploited.

Nonetheless, the model provoked lively discussion and it was agreed that it did capture something about the nature of work-life balance issues affecting the residents of Pride Fields. One of the significant implications is that there can be no single or simple policy solution to the diverse needs and aspirations signified by the different scenarios.

Disempowerment

It is clear, nonetheless, that people on Pride Fields Estate would like - more jobs; better managers; more accessible childcare (especially in the early morning and during school holidays); more efficient benefits/tax credit administration; and more extensive advice and information provision. More than this, however, what strikes us is the sense of powerlessness that was expressed - especially, perhaps, by those in the guilty worker and the lucky carer scenarios. In various ways they were experiencing not just a lack of opportunity, but a lack of control over their work-life balance. Guilty workers couldn't get what they wanted, while lucky carers got it just by chance or good fortune. To address this powerlessness or lack of control might require:

1. *More predictable opportunity structures and a clearer sense of such employment norms and practices as are (or should be) customary in the area.*

The practices of unaccountable employers have significant implications for family life. Work-life balance requires that jobs should, so far as possible, be stable and that employment standards are consistent. In practice, an inner London neighbourhood like Pride Fields has access to a metropolitan rather than a local labour market, the volatility, scale and fragmented nature of which make it inherently unpredictable. While there is a certain sense of community on the Pride Fields Estate, there was no awareness among the participants in our study of where the economic foundations of that community might be located: residents do not by and large have shared labour market experiences. Urban neighbourhoods in the inner reaches of big cities are not like mining villages or company towns in which information about employment opportunities and customary practices might once have been exchanged by word of mouth. Paradoxically, what is more, jobs created in inner-urban

¹⁰ It has been suggested there is a group of women workers who submit as 'grateful slaves' to unsatisfactory terms of unemployment or else gladly accept minimal concessions to their needs: see Hakim, C. (1991) 'Grateful slaves and self-made women: Fact and fantasy in women's work orientations', *European Sociological Review*, 7 (2).

neighbourhoods - for example, by regeneration funding - tend neither to be permanent, nor necessarily soundly managed. The solution lies partly in more proactive and locally oriented information services, an issue to which we return below. Additionally, however, local employers of any size or standing should be encouraged to consider how they promote their public face and how they publicise the jobs and the terms of employment that they offer. Characteristically, in a neighbourhood such as Pride Fields, a significant proportion of workers are engaged in the public and voluntary/community sectors and it is incumbent on those sectors, more than at present, to take the lead and set the standard.

2. *A social responsibility agenda?*

This leads on to a related and equally fundamental question. Some more vocal Pride Fields residents were keen to promote the government's own argument that there is a 'business case' for work-life balance. It is supposed that flexible managers who accommodate people's needs will get better results. Recent evidence suggests that while good management does lead to better work-life balance outcomes, work-life balance does not of itself enhance productivity¹¹. On the basis of the narratives we had heard we wondered whether work-life balance would be better promoted as a part of the social responsibility agenda, and not on the basis of the business case. In some instances the business case may be tenuous or non-existent. The circumstances of some participants in our study were frankly such that if wholly suitable spaces were to be found for them in the labour market the culture and dynamics of the work place might have to change quite significantly and in ways that would not provide short-term economic benefits for employers¹². Notions of corporate social responsibility have been applied generally to the global practices of multinational corporations and to the environmental practices of local businesses, but also specifically, for example, to employment practices in relation to disabled workers¹³. There is a case for adding work-life balance issues to the corporate social responsibility agenda in discussions with national employers' organisations, with bodies such as the UK Social Investment Forum, and even, perhaps, with socially responsible local employers.

¹¹ See Bloom, N. et al. (2006) *Work Life Balance, Management Practices and Productivity*, LSE Centre for Economic Performance - which also demonstrates that, subject to the quality of management, neither does work-life balance *harm* productivity.

¹² This is a suggestion that resonates with related arguments about the desirability of a 'life-first' approach to welfare-to-work: see Dean, H. (2003) 'Re-conceptualising welfare-to-work for people with multiple problems and needs', *Journal of Social Policy* 32 (3).

¹³ See the statement by the Employers' Forum for Disability at <http://www.employers-forum.co.uk/www/csr/index.htm>

3. *More certainty about childcare.*

Childcare provision is not meeting the needs of every parent. Choice and diversity in childcare are important, but what matters most, perhaps, is that childcare is seen to be generally available and wholly reliable. Our findings are consonant with those of other researchers in demonstrating that organising childcare is time-consuming and stressful for parents¹⁴. Working parents are not only grappling with practical issues of affordability and accessibility, but with moral considerations about what is right for their children¹⁵. In a neighbourhood such as Pride Fields there are competing views about what constitutes ‘good quality’ childcare. Different parents have different priorities with regard to provision for children’s emotional needs on the one hand or their developmental needs on the other. It must be recognised that for many, informal (i.e. ‘unregistered’) childcare is and will remain a critical and valued part of their coping strategy. Where formal childcare provision is available parents seek certainty as much as choice. They must feel they can trust the provision that is available¹⁶. The fluidity and perceived impermanence of formal childcare arrangements on Pride Fields is problematic and can undermine people’s confidence in what is available.

4. *Greater transparency and clarity with regard to employment and benefit rights.*

By and large people do not fully understand their employment and benefit rights. Employment law and the benefits/tax credits system are intrinsically complex. Employment laws are designed to balance the competing interests of employers and employees. However, when employees lack awareness of such laws and employers lack the willingness to implement them, the outcomes can be highly unbalanced. Benefits systems are designed increasingly to tailor support to meet diverse individual needs. The government claimed when it introduced the Tax Credit system to be creating a ‘seamless’ system of support for families with children¹⁷, but while universal Child Benefit appears to provide a seamless (if skimpy) undergarment to which the participants in our study were comfortably inured, the tax credit scheme was worn as a strange and clumsy outer-garment. While essential to many households, it had been rejected by some because of the risk of overpayment and the fear that it might

¹⁴ For example, Wheelock, J. and Jones, K. (2002) ‘Grandparents are the next best thing: Informal childcare for working parents in urban Britain’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 31 (3).

¹⁵ See especially Duncan, S. and Irwin, S. (2004) ‘The social patterning of values and rationalities: Mothers’ choices in combining caring and employment, *Social Policy and Society*, 3 (4).

¹⁶ This strongly echoes findings reported in Daycare Trust (2004) *Talking about Childcare: Conversations with parents and children from low-income families*, London.

¹⁷ See HM Treasury (2002) *Child and Working Tax Credits, Modernisation of Britain’s Tax and Benefit System*, Paper 10.

at any moment be snatched away. If the people to whom we spoke on Pride Fields are to believe in their rights at work and their entitlements to benefits or tax credits, large quantities of indigestible information will not be enough. People's rights need to be simpler. Or when rights cannot be made simple, people need sources of information and advice that they can trust and they need advocates who can effectively champion their rights.

The quality of work-life balance in a neighbourhood such as Pride Fields depends on a variety of factors. It could be improved by more effective legislation and greater consistency in the local implementation of such legislation. However, it also requires greater awareness that the needs of employees with caring responsibilities are diverse and that low-income earners are especially powerless when it comes to asserting their claims. The residents of Pride Fields have demonstrated this with some clarity. Significantly, they were not able through our study to specify agreed elements of an itemised action plan for the improvement of work-life balance within their neighbourhood. But they have, perhaps, signalled some more fundamental and elusive truths that policy makers, employers and public service providers need first to grasp.