

FEELING THE

BENEFITS?

PROCESSED AND PUNISHED

An insight into vulnerable young people's
perspectives on the current welfare system and
Jobcentre Plus

PREFACE

A lot has been said and written about the merits and flaws of the existing welfare system as well as the reforms currently being rolled out across the UK.

However, voices notable in their absence from this debate have been those of the thousands of vulnerable young people that rely on the welfare system in their times of need.

The purpose of this ongoing research series entitled - '***Feeling the Benefits?***' - is to gather vulnerable young people's experiences and viewpoints and give this often unheard and overlooked group a voice on this important issue.

Based on the findings from this research, the YMCA will be publishing a series of reports, each designed around the views expressed by vulnerable young people.

This report - '***Processed and Punished***' - is focussed on vulnerable young people's experiences of the current welfare system, in particular looking at the support provided by Jobcentre Plus.

THE YMCA

The YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping over 58 million people in 119 countries.

In England, the YMCA are the largest voluntary sector provider of supported accommodation for young people, and the largest voluntary sector provider of activities and services that promote health and well-being.

There are 114 YMCAs in England, helping to transform over 530 different communities so that all young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

The YMCA strives to create inspiring environments where young people can develop confidence to choose their own path in life, find fulfilment and determine their own future.

THE RESEARCH

To gather the views of vulnerable young people, a range of research methods were employed. This included undertaking detailed interviews with vulnerable young people living in YMCAs. The interviews that informed this report took place between August and September 2013 with residents at three YMCAs in the North West of England; Blackburn, Crewe and St Helens.

A total of 12 detailed interviews were carried out, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, during which the vulnerable young people were asked questions that focussed on the following areas; their background, their education and training, housing, employment, their current benefits and the planned changes to the welfare system.

The vulnerable young people interviewed were selected by the YMCAs and were all between 18-24 years old, living in supported housing and accessing benefits. Detailed interviews were also conducted with the key workers responsible for supporting these vulnerable young people at the YMCAs.

The qualitative evidence from these interviews is also supplemented by more quantitative information drawn from a survey of vulnerable young people accessing YMCA programmes and services. This survey was also conducted between August and September 2013 with 86 vulnerable young people, the majority of whom are also currently living in supported housing.

The questions in the survey focussed on the reforms to the support for housing costs, including the changes to the local housing allowance, payment of housing costs, localised council tax support, the benefit cap and the social sector size criteria.

THE CURRENT WELFARE SYSTEM

Introduction

For the thousands of young people that the YMCA works with on a daily basis, the welfare system is an invaluable safety net.

The YMCA works with particularly vulnerable young people including care leavers, young people who are estranged from their parents, young people who have slept rough on the street or been sofa surfing, those who have faced abuse at home, and those who have faced relationship breakdowns with partners or other members of their family.

Those participating in the research had all experienced one or more of the above and it was these circumstances that had left them having to call upon the benefit system, both to help pay for a place to live and for food to eat.

Far from being a lifestyle choice, those vulnerable young people participating in the research described living on benefits as a day-to-day struggle.

“After essentials I have about £10 left to myself for 2 weeks, you can’t do much with £10 for 2 weeks”

“I’m a teenager, but I can’t do what other teenagers do”

“It meets the bare minimum. Yes it will keep you fed and yes it will pay you through, but it is a struggle”

“The quicker I can get off benefits, the better”

“No one in the Government knows what it’s like to live on benefits and in a hostel”

These views are reaffirmed by those working with the vulnerable young people in the YMCAs.

“Life on benefits should not be the easy option, and I don’t think it is. But we have been sold this idea and it seems it is believed”

For all the vulnerable young people participating in the research, there was a drive to find work, leave supported housing and get off benefits.

“I want to get myself sorted out for my kids. I don’t want them to think their mum is a dead-beat who has done nothing with her life”

“I don’t want to just sit there doing nothing all day”

“I want to find work; I hate not doing anything through the days”

“Because I am worth more in life than drink and gambling, I want to put my experiences into helping someone else”

“I don’t want to feel like a charity case, I want to be able to do things for myself”

“I want a job, I’m sick of living on nothing”

While motivation for wanting to get off benefits was not an issue, the vulnerable young people taking part in the research felt that a wide range of barriers stood in their way of achieving this goal.

For a number of those questioned, it was a lack of qualifications and training that was seen as preventing the vulnerable young people from moving away from needing to rely on benefits. Since a large number of the vulnerable young people that the YMCA works with do not take the A-Level to Degree route, finding the right path through to sustained employment can be more complex. Alongside this, finding funding can also be more difficult for those not taking this route.

Given that they are at the beginning of their working life, a lack of experience was also consistently raised by the vulnerable young people as being a significant barrier to finding sustained employment.

“Everyone needs experience, but how do you get experience if they (employers) don’t give you a chance”

This lack of work experience puts young people at a more disadvantaged position when entering into the job market, especially given that the availability of work is currently in short supply and competition for jobs is high.

For this reason, the limited number of job opportunities accessible to them in their local area, was frequently raised as being a key barrier to finding work and moving off benefits. For these vulnerable young people access to transport was also an issue that further limits the job opportunities available to them, as they are often unable to travel to look for work due to the cost of public transport and lack of access to a car.

“Round here there are barely any (jobs)”

“There is a lack of opportunities in this area”

Additionally, as a result of their background, having a criminal record is a reality for some of the vulnerable young people that the YMCA works with. This acts as a further barrier to finding employment with many companies rejecting individuals with a criminal record, regardless of the circumstances behind it and the actions they have taken since.

“I try (to talk about how I got my criminal record), but they always say it is policy”

“Hopefully people will see me for who I am, not for my past”

“I’ll get so far in a process...and then they find out I’ve got a criminal record and it changes completely”

It is a result of these barriers when applying for work that leads to continual rejections with little or no feedback. This situation has become a daily reality for many of the vulnerable young people looking to find work. According to the vulnerable young people taking part in the research, it is these continuous knockbacks that most impacts on their confidence in looking for and finding work.

Finding employment can be stressful even for the most confident individuals who have already had experience of going through the process. For vulnerable young people at the very outset of their careers confidence can be a significant barrier, and for many of those taking part in the research this was the case.

The confidence of vulnerable young people can already be fragile and the day-to-day struggle of living on benefits, constant knock-backs and barriers they face can damage their confidence further.

“Going out and looking for work is simple and easy...what makes it frustrating are people not getting back to you”

“Even if you didn’t get the job, they should get back to you”

As the research demonstrates, despite their motivations, the barriers that vulnerable young people face in finding employment, leaving supported housing and getting off benefits, can be wide-ranging and the longer they face these barriers without success, the more problems this creates. The result of this is that more and more vulnerable young people spending greater periods of time unemployed, claiming benefits and depending on supported housing for somewhere to live.

For these reasons, to ensure vulnerable young people get off on the right foot and make those important early steps in their career, they felt it was critical that those working within the welfare system spend time to understand these barriers that they face and are able to provide tailored early advice and support to help overcome them.

The role of Jobcentre Plus

However, far removed from being somewhere vulnerable young people can go to receive the support they need to help overcome the barriers they face finding work and getting off benefits, Jobcentre Plus is actually seen by many as simply a place for processing and punishment.

There was a broad perception among those questioned that the support and advice provided by Jobcentre Plus to vulnerable young people has declined in quantity and quality, and whilst there were some examples of good practice, the majority of those taking part in the research felt that Jobcentre Plus is not fit for purpose in supporting vulnerable young people at the start of their careers.

“They don’t even look at your job search, they say ‘sign this’ and ‘goodbye’”

“They don’t really help you; they just tell you that you need to find a job”

“The support they directly provide is less than before, they just point you in the direction of others”

- 1** The YMCA proposes that Jobcentre Plus advisors spend more time with vulnerable young people when their initial claims are submitted to better understand the barriers they face to finding sustained employment and getting off benefits.
- 2** The YMCA proposes that increased levels of ongoing support are provided to vulnerable young people tailored around helping them to overcome the barriers that prevent them from finding sustained employment and getting off benefits.

For many of the vulnerable young people taking part in the research, their issues with Jobcentre Plus begin from their application for benefits, a process many find complex and lengthy. This was especially the case for those seeking to claim Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment Support Allowance. For these benefits, the application process was seen to be excessively complex when compared to Housing Benefit.

"It's lengthy and ridiculous"

"For people not familiar with filling in forms, I can imagine it would be really difficult...things aren't worded simply enough"

"Housing benefit is fairly simple, but Job Seeker's Allowance is ridiculous"

As a result of this, delays and breaks in receiving their benefits were reported as being a common occurrence by the vulnerable young people participating in the research. This was particularly the case when initially claiming or transferring between different benefits.

The vulnerable young people taking part in the research felt that Jobcentre Plus were slow to agree and slow to start making benefit payments, but had become increasingly quick to take them away, seemingly without any regard for how this impacts on the individuals affected.

The views expressed by those taking part in the research regarding the complexity of the current welfare system and the difficulties they face attempting to navigate their way through this, are supported by staff working with them at the YMCAs.

"It's a complicated benefit system and I believe our residents would have more gaps in their benefits without the support YMCA provide"

Ian, 21, Blackburn

Since putting in his initial claim for Jobseeker's Allowance in February 2013, Ian had been contacting Jobcentre Plus on a regular basis to follow-up on why his claim had not been processed. At each point, different explanations were given as to why his claim had not been set up, including not being able to contact Ian and losing his application.

This resulted in Ian having to make repeat applications online, over the phone and even at his local Jobcentre Plus, but to no avail. This process of going back and forth lasted for just under six months. During which time, aside from the Housing Benefit that was being paid directly to Blackburn YMCA, Ian had to live without any income, which included being unable to receive any hardship funding due to not having an active claim.

"I have been getting a food parcel every week from local churches and mosques, but mentally I've not coped"

The challenges of living without an income and the frustration at being unable to find work eventually led to Ian having a breakdown.

In August 2013, Ian's claim for Job Seeker's Allowance was finally resolved and he has now begun attending his regular meetings at his local Jobcentre Plus.

"After everything I have been through to go in and sit down in front of someone for two seconds to show them a piece of paper to prove I have looked for work...it was pointless"

- 3** The YMCA proposes that vulnerable young people are offered more support and advice completing their initial benefit applications and when transferring between benefits.

The vulnerable young people participating in the research felt that many of the problems they were facing with Jobcentre Plus were as a consequence of poor communication within the organisation.

Frequently being unable to speak with someone who knew about them and their claim - when they go in and when they phone Jobcentre Plus as well as the failure of different sections or bodies dealing with their claim to pass on relevant information - were raised by the vulnerable young people as hindering the support and advice they were receiving and were a cause of the delays and breaks in receiving benefits.

“Every time you ring or speak to someone at the Jobcentre for help, you just get passed from person to person, which doesn’t help you in the slightest”

“With them actually communicating within the Jobcentre, it is ridiculous. You’ll be told one day that you will be called back tomorrow, but when you speak to them asking why you haven’t been called, they will know nothing about it”

“You can’t speak to someone who knows about your claim”

“They don’t tell you enough information, you have to find information and that is where people struggle”

“There is a serious lack of communication within the building and within the organisation...it’s a really poor standard”

“They all need to know what is going on, regardless of their role”

4 The YMCA proposes that improved approaches to communication and information sharing be put in place within the Jobcentre Plus, in particular for dealing with vulnerable young people.

Linked to the communication issues, another consistent theme running through the research was the negative attitude that some Jobcentre Plus staff displayed towards vulnerable young people accessing its services, and the lack of time they seem willing or able to invest in understanding their individual needs and circumstances.

“Sometimes you can get someone who will try to help you out, but nine times out of ten you get someone who just doesn’t care”

“It’s like no one in it has compassion”

“People do look down on you when they find out you are on benefits, especially youth on benefits...even people in the Jobcentre look down on you”

“Some people (working at the Jobcentre Plus) just stick you all in the same boat, you’re unemployed and you’re lazy”

The views expressed by the vulnerable young people are reaffirmed by the YMCA staff that support them on a day-to-day basis. A number of the YMCA staff interviewed had seen first-hand the way that some Jobcentre Plus staff treat the people coming in to and look for support and advice.

“We have seen a decrease in levels of good customer service from Jobcentre Plus and benefit administrators”

“The way that benefit claimants are portrayed and vilified in the press and by the Government appears to have given some workers in the sector a license to provide poor levels of service”

As already highlighted, confidence can be an issue for many vulnerable young people on benefits. Rather than encouraging vulnerable young people to find education, training and work, the attitudes of a number of Jobcentre Plus staff only act to demoralise them and create a level of resentment towards them and any support and advice that may be offered.

As well as not being conducive to helping them find work, in conducting the research, examples were raised where the attitudes and actions of Jobcentre Plus staff have pushed some of these already vulnerable young people ‘over the edge’ emotionally and mentally.

Anthony, 21, St Helens

Anthony was bullied at school and, as a result by Year 8 he was regularly ‘acting up’ and spent most of his remaining years being educated in isolation. As a result of the problems Anthony faced in school, he only came out of school with one GCSE between A*-C.

“School works for some kids, but some kids need educating in different ways”

After a breakdown in the relationship with his Dad at age 16, Anthony was forced to leave home and spent time living in a bed-sit before eventually finding a place in a local supported housing scheme.

However, after Anthony’s tenancy there came to an end, he became homeless and spent 5 months ‘sofa surfing’ with friends and family. It was during this time that he began suffering with depression and substance misuse. Anthony was eventually put in touch with the YMCA in St Helens, where he currently lives.

In dealing with Jobcentre Plus, Anthony finds the people who understand his past situation are supportive in helping him move towards finding employment. However, he often finds that he has to deal with different advisors.

“When I’m dealing with someone who hasn’t dealt with me before, the tone of their voice just seems nasty and cruel”

At a recent meeting, the attitude of the member of staff led to Anthony having an angry outburst in the Jobcentre. It was the stress caused by this event that pushed him back into a period of depression and being signed off by his doctor for a prolonged period of time.

As this demonstrates, a culture seems to have developed within some Jobcentre Plus where vulnerable young people are not dealt with as individuals, treated based on their needs or handled with compassion. Instead there was a feeling amongst many of those participating in the research that they were merely seen as yet another case that needed processing as quickly as possible.

5 The YMCA proposes that Jobcentre Plus advisors be supported to better understand the difficulties and barriers that vulnerable young people commonly face to enable them to provide more tailored support.

One area where the vulnerable young people felt all these issues with Jobcentre Plus were coming to ahead is in the way that sanctions are currently being administered. The findings from the research give a worrying indication of the ‘sanction first, think later’ approach currently being taken by Jobcentre Plus.

The most common reasons given for being sanctioned by the young people taking part in the research, were failing to attend an interview or appointment and an insufficient job search. While some of those questioned fully accepted responsibility where they had been sanctioned, many vulnerable young people suggested errors by Jobcentre Plus as being a major contributing factor.

A key finding from the evidence gathered is that many of the vulnerable young people were not made aware of the changes introduced in October 2012 by Jobcentre Plus staff. For many, their first introduction to the changes came with being sanctioned.

The research conducted also found a significant number of cases where errors by Jobcentre Plus have been a major contributing factor in many vulnerable young people having their benefit payments stopped. The most common errors reported by the vulnerable young people included not being informed of appointments and a failure within Jobcentre Plus to pass on or record relevant information regarding their claim. Such errors were reported as becoming an even greater problem where claimants were referred by Jobcentre Plus to external agencies such as work providers to provide support.

The increase in number of sanctions, as well as other delays and breaks in receiving benefits are adding to the time that vulnerable young people are spending without access to benefits or other forms of income.

Not only does this impact on them financially, increasing the likelihood of them falling into debt, there is a human cost. Being sanctioned can detrimentally affect vulnerable young people's physical and mental wellbeing.

"I didn't cope, I had no-one"

"It's how long they left me with no money knowing I was pregnant and had to buy my own food"

"I was unable to eat and it was lucky they (YMCA) could help"

"You have a much more negative attitude to life as a whole, as you know that for the next however long you have nothing coming in and there is nothing you can do about it"

"I went three months living on food parcels... which is really degrading because you lose all your dignity. It's not just physically hard, it's mentally hard"

As well as detrimentally affecting their physical and emotional wellbeing, many of the vulnerable young people taking part in the research felt that having delays in their benefits and being sanctioned actually hindered their ability to look for work and get off benefits.

"I was unable to look for work as much as I could before"

"It stopped me from searching for work as I had no money to get to different employers"

Given the impact that sanctions are currently having on vulnerable young people, this topic along with recommendations is dealt with in a separate report in this series entitled - **'Signed on and Sanctioned'**.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the research demonstrates, for the thousands of vulnerable young people that YMCAs work with on a daily basis, the welfare system is an invaluable safety net in their time of need, whether this is due to them having left care, becoming estranged from their parents, spending time homeless, having faced abuse, or experiencing a breakdown in a relationship.

Contrary to the common perception that relying on the welfare system is a lifestyle choice, the vulnerable young people taking part in the research described their current circumstances as a day-to-day struggle and spoke at length of their desire to get off benefits.

However, the vulnerable young people interviewed identified a range of barriers that needed to be overcome to turn their desire to get off benefits into reality. These included their confidence in looking and applying for work, their lack of training, qualifications and experience, and the limited number of job opportunities currently available.

To ensure these vulnerable young people get off on the right foot and make those important early steps in their career, they felt it was critical that those working within the welfare system understand the barriers they face and provide tailored early advice and support to help them overcome them.

However, far from being somewhere they can go to receive this advice and support, Jobcentre Plus is actually seen by many vulnerable young people as simply a place for processing and punishment. Rather than motivating and helping them move towards a situation where they are no longer dependent of benefits, the current welfare system is actually pushing many of them further away from this becoming a reality.

The vulnerable young people felt the current welfare system is failing them in a number of ways: through complex and lengthy processes, poor levels of communication, the negative attitudes of Jobcentre Plus staff, the declining level and quality of support, frequent delays and breaks in their benefit payments and the seemingly arbitrary way that sanctions are currently being imposed.

Given that the research focussed on those young people living in supported housing, which are some of the most vulnerable individuals in need of the greatest support, the lack of support and advice currently being provided by Jobcentre Plus should be seen as even more alarming.

Without the support currently being provided by third sector organisations like the YMCA, many of the vulnerable young people felt their situation would be even worse.

The research suggests that Jobcentre Plus is currently not fit for purpose for vulnerable young people at the start of their careers and by allowing them to simply be processed and punished, the Government is failing a generation of vulnerable young people.

Based on the views expressed by those questioned, a series of recommendations are set out to best support vulnerable young people accessing benefits in England.

- 1** The YMCA proposes that Jobcentre Plus advisors spend more time with vulnerable young people when their initial claims are submitted to better understand the barriers they face to finding sustained employment and getting off benefits.
- 2** The YMCA proposes that increased levels of ongoing support are provided to vulnerable young people tailored around helping them to overcome the barriers that prevent them from finding sustained employment and getting off benefits.
- 3** The YMCA proposes that vulnerable young people are offered more support and advice completing their initial benefit applications and when transferring between benefits.
- 4** The YMCA proposes that improved approaches to communication and information sharing be put in place within the Jobcentre Plus, in particular for dealing with vulnerable young people.
- 5** The YMCA proposes that Jobcentre Plus advisors be supported to better understand the difficulties and barriers that vulnerable young people commonly face to enable them to provide more tailored support.



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