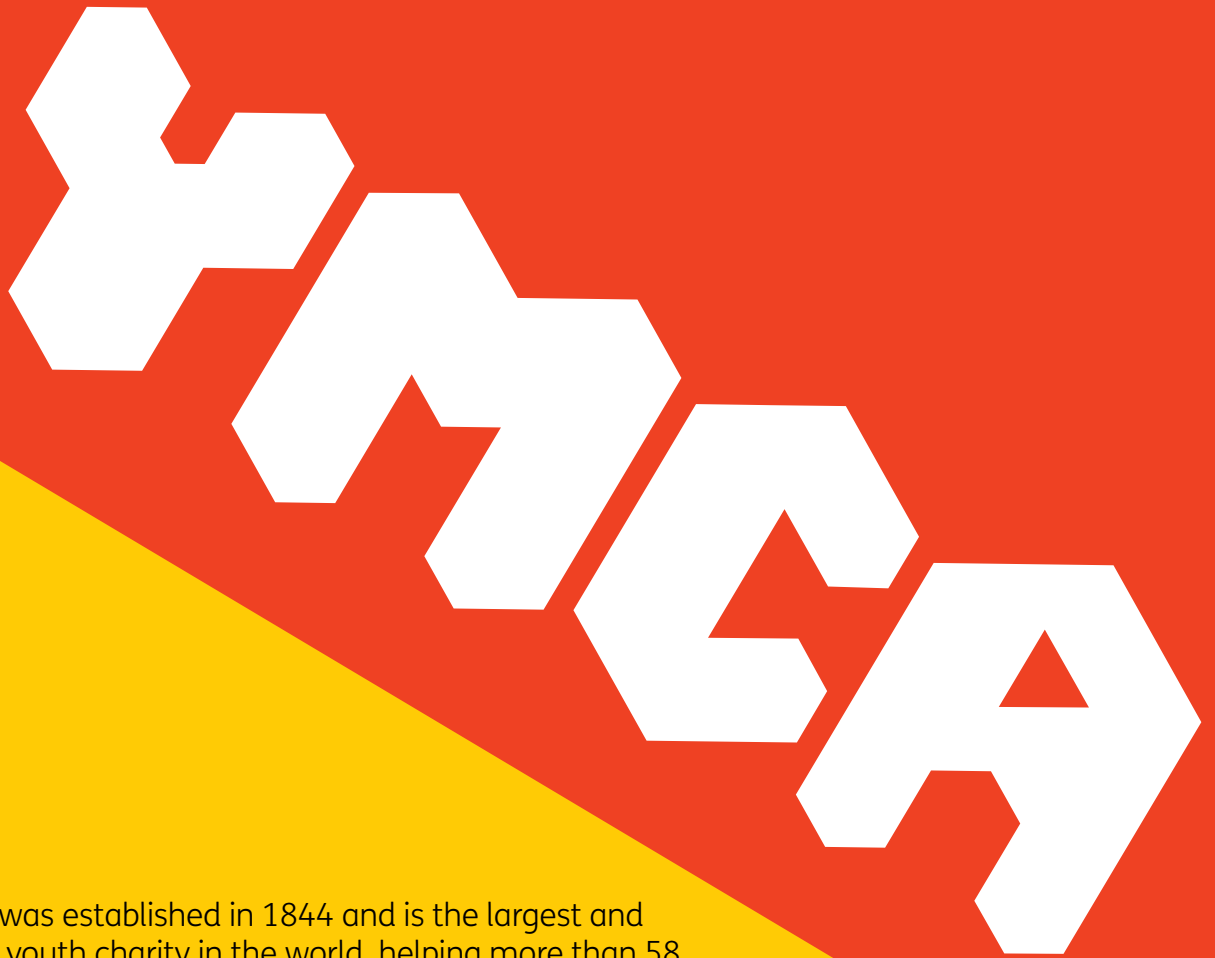


# Safety Net or Springboard?

A report examining the role of the job centre in supporting young people to find long-term employment

September 2015

YMCA ENGLAND



YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping more than 58 million people in 119 countries. Here in England where it all began, 114 YMCAs work to transform more than 530 different communities, impacting on the lives of nearly 600,000 people every year.

YMCA enables people to develop to their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

YMCA's integrated approach enables young people to choose from a range of education and skills-based training, as well as work placements and apprenticeships, helping almost 43,000 people to engage in education, skills and training every year.

# Methodology

The evidence set out in this report is based on a series of focus groups held with young people who were currently not in employment, education or training or had recently experienced a period of unemployment. A total of 79 young people participated in the focus groups.

The focus groups took place during July and August 2015 at 11 locations in a total of nine regions across England; North East (North Tyneside), North West (Birkenhead), Yorkshire and Humber (Grimsby), East Midlands (Derby), West Midlands (Birmingham), East of England (Bedford, Norwich), London (Dartford, Westminster), South East (Horsham) and South West (Exeter).

By conducting the focus groups and publishing the findings, this report seeks to give those young people experiencing unemployment a voice in shaping the support needed to make a successful transition into employment.

# Acknowledgments

A special thank you goes to all the young people who shared their views, opinions and stories as part of the focus groups, Freya Cann for helping to conduct a focus group, and YMCAs across England who helped coordinate the sessions. Thank you also to Jonathan Byrne and Maria Storr for the cover photo.

# Summary

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## Introduction

High levels of youth unemployment are not a new problem in the UK. While the global recession saw a significant jump in the number of young people facing unemployment, in reality, the upward trend started long before the financial crisis, as far back as 2004.

For this reason, despite the economic growth we are now seeing, it should be no surprise that the numbers of young people having to deal with periods of unemployment remain high.

Given that this is not a new problem within the UK, successive governments have made attempts to tackle the high levels of youth unemployment by introducing a range of back-to-work schemes with varying degrees of success.

The latest in this series of back-to-work schemes aimed at addressing youth unemployment will be the introduction of a Youth Obligation. Based on their experiences of the existing provisions, the research seeks to give young people a voice in shaping this new approach.

## Findings

The overwhelming feelings expressed by the young people participating in the research were ones of frustration and dismay towards job centres and the support they currently provide in helping to find employment.

More than nine in 10 of individuals taking part in the focus groups believed the support they were currently or previously receiving from their job centre was not helping them find employment.

Through the research, YMCA sought to understand why this alienation exists between young people and job centres and to identify what measures they felt were necessary to transform the job centre and the wider social security system from a safety net to a springboard into employment.

Through the focus groups, young people identified six areas they believed job centres could improve to help increase their prospects of finding employment:

- ▶ Understanding young people's circumstances
- ▶ Listening to young people's aspirations
- ▶ Supporting young people to look for work
- ▶ Getting young people the right skills and qualifications
- ▶ Securing young people with meaningful work experience
- ▶ Retaining support for young people transitioning into employment

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## Conclusions

Unemployment remains a critical issue for young people and the country as a whole, as such the Government is right to recognise that more needs to be done to tackle it.

Contrary to much of the rhetoric surrounding those young people accessing the social security system, the reality is that most young people who find themselves out of work desperately want to find employment.

However, rather than preparing and helping young people find work, in many cases the existing job centre arrangements merely dehumanise those who access its services, damaging their confidence and in some cases even setting back their journey into employment.

Despite a range of well-intentioned schemes being put in place by successive governments, many young people are continuing to be prescribed the same generic support, regardless of their circumstances and aspirations. This is creating a significant discordance between how young people view the service being provided and what governments believe they offer.

While examples of good practice do exist, the research illustrates that these are few and far between and that job centres across the country are not currently providing young people with the employment support they need.

It is clear that in their current form job centres are failing to fulfil one of their two key roles - providing public employment services. The research shows that young people are not seeing their local job centre as a place they can go to get support finding a job, but simply as a benefit processing office.

Significant reforms are needed to transform job centres from a safety net that simply provides financial support into a springboard that helps young people find employment.

## Recommendations

If the Government is serious about addressing the issue of youth unemployment and transforming the social security system from a safety net to a springboard, YMCA is proposing that the new Youth Obligation be matched with an obligation on job centres.

This obligation should commit job centres to providing each young person accessing its services with:

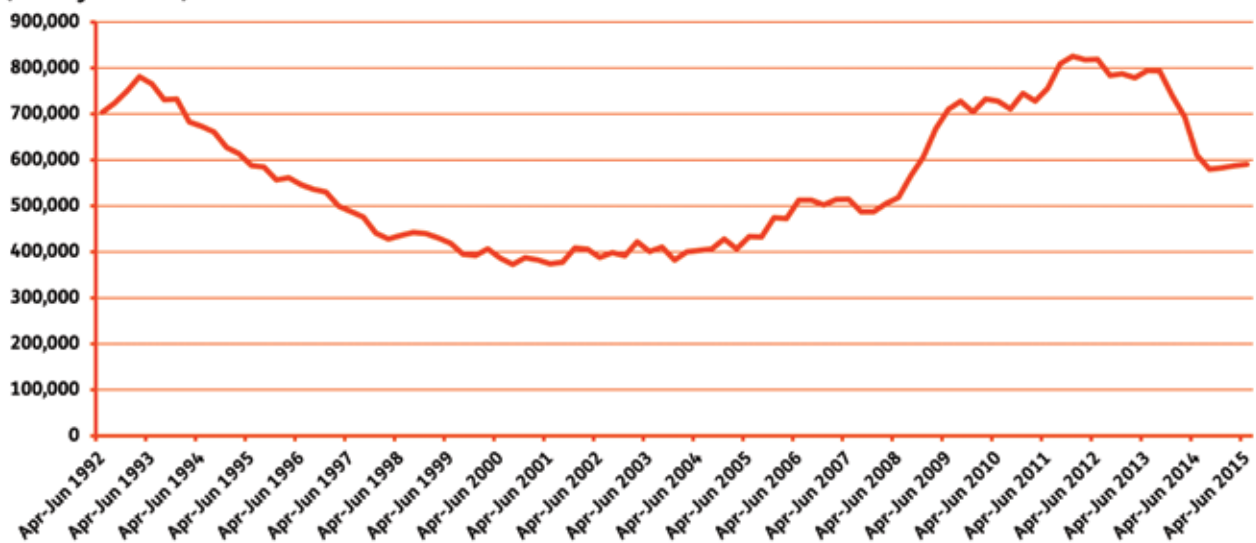
- ▶ A more detailed initial assessment exploring their personal circumstances and aspirations, which is then used to form their claimant commitment.
- ▶ A specialist youth work coach which remains consistent throughout the length of their claim.
- ▶ More comprehensive regular sign-on sessions with their work coach.
- ▶ Regular opportunities to meet with their work coach at informal drop-in sessions.
- ▶ Opportunities to have relevant training and work experience incorporated within their claimant commitment.
- ▶ Options to discuss how available funding is utilised to enable them to participate in training.
- ▶ The ability to participate in training lasting for more than 16 hours a week without affecting their claim.
- ▶ In work support from their work coach or a designated mentor when they transition into employment.

# Introduction

## Youth Unemployment in the UK

High levels of youth unemployment are not a new problem in the UK. While the global recession saw a significant jump in the number of young people facing unemployment, in reality the upward trend started long before the financial crisis, as far back as 2004.

**Numbers of young people unemployed  
(18-24 years olds)**



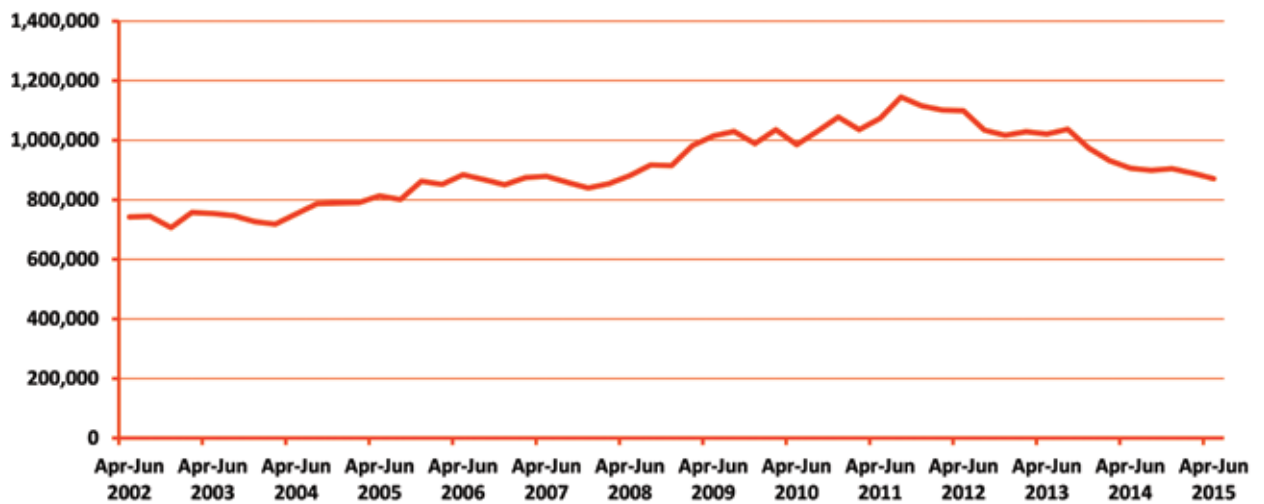
In the intervening period prior to the financial crisis, youth unemployment had already risen by nearly 25% in just four years.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that the financial crisis did not have a significant impact. As the graph above demonstrates, youth unemployment hit new record highs after the crash in 2008. At its peak, more than 825,000 young people were unemployed in the UK.<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, despite the economic growth we are now seeing, it should be no surprise that the numbers of young people having to deal with periods of unemployment remain high, whichever indicator you choose to look at.

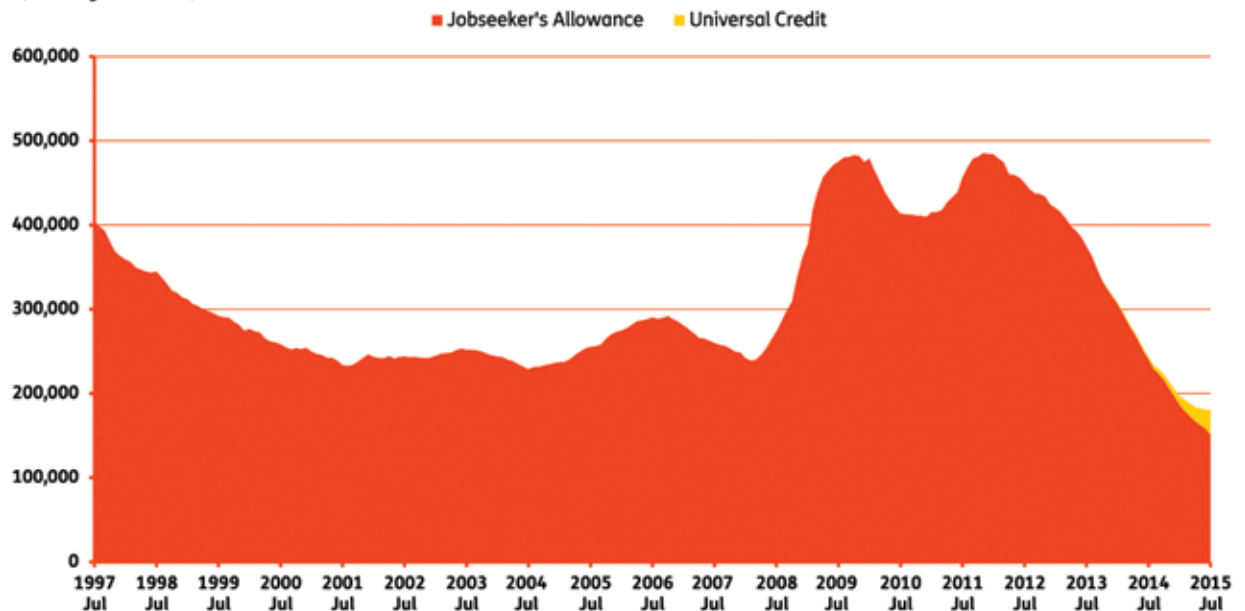
This is illustrated by the fact that youth unemployment is still at nearly 600,000. With the youth unemployment rate currently standing at 14%, young people are three times more likely to be out of work than any other age group.<sup>3</sup>

**Numbers of young people not in employment, education or training  
(18-24 years olds)**



In addition, the numbers of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) also remains at nearly 900,000.<sup>4</sup>

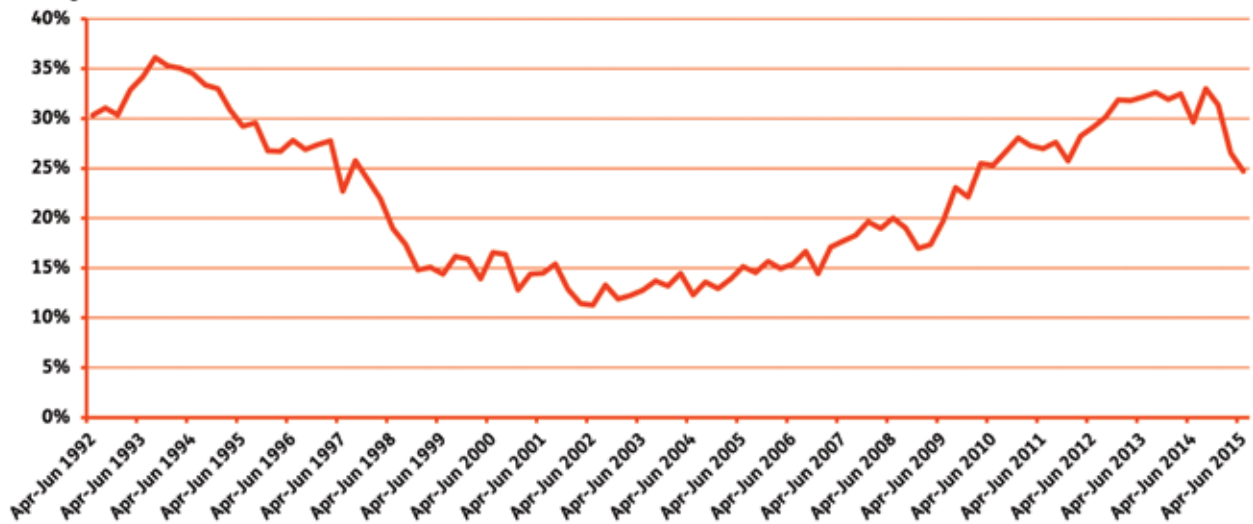
**Numbers of young people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance and Universal Credit  
(18-24 years olds)**



This relatively high level of youth unemployment is also reflected in the current numbers claiming Jobseeker's Allowance and Universal Credit. There are currently 151,000 young people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance and a further 30,000 who are out of work and claiming Universal Credit.<sup>5</sup>

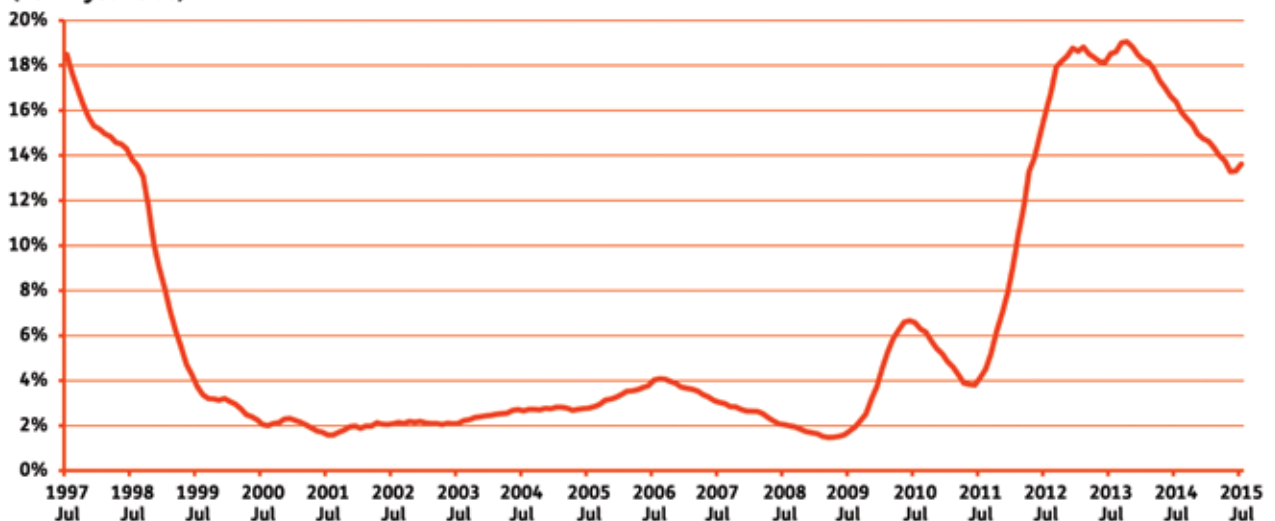
While the numbers of young people who are unemployed remains higher than other age groups across all these indicators, young people do largely spend shorter periods of time out of work. Seven in 10 of those young people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or Universal Credit spend less than six months on these benefits, compared to less than six in 10 among older age groups.<sup>6</sup>

**Percentage of young people unemployed for longer than 12 months (18-24 years olds)**



While the majority of young people are only unemployed for short periods, a notable trend coming out of the recession is the relatively small but growing numbers who are now spending long periods of time out of work. This is evidenced by a quarter (25%) of those young people currently out of work having been unemployed for over 12 months.<sup>7</sup>

**Percentage of young people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance for longer than 12 months (18-24 year olds)**



A trend that is also reflected in the claimant rate, with 14% of those young people on Jobseeker's Allowance now having a claim lasting for more than 12 months.<sup>8</sup>



## The Policy Context

Given that this is not a new problem within the UK, successive governments have made attempts to tackle the high levels of youth unemployment by introducing a range of back-to-work schemes with varying degrees of success.

### Future Jobs Fund

The Future Jobs Fund was introduced in October 2009 to create subsidised jobs for unemployed young people who were considered to be at a disadvantage in the labour market.

The scheme was designed to build the skills and work experience of young people to assist them in securing long-term employment after completing their subsidised role. Over the life of the scheme, just over 105,000 jobs were created at a cost approximately £680 million.<sup>9</sup>

Based on an analysis conducted by the Department for Work and Pensions, two years after starting the on the Future Jobs Fund scheme, participants were 16% less likely to be in receipt of social security support and 27% more likely to be in unsubsidised employment than they would have been had they not participated.<sup>10</sup>

However, a net cost of approximately £3,100 per participant the scheme did prove to be relatively expensive.<sup>11</sup> As a result of this the last Government announced in May 2010 that it would end the scheme with the Prime Minister describing it as “one of the most ineffective job schemes there’s been.”<sup>12</sup>

### Work Programme

The Work Programme, launched in June 2011, has the aim of helping long-term unemployed people get and keep jobs.

In most cases, it is those young people who have been out of work for more than nine months who are referred to the Work Programme, although this may happen earlier for those young people deemed to be facing significant barriers to work.

The scheme is run by a range of providers who have the freedom to introduce different schemes to help people who are unemployed to find work. These providers receive a job outcome payment after a participant has spent a minimum length of time in employment (which can be either 13 or 26 weeks) and payments for every four weeks the person remains in employment thereafter.

By March 2015, nearly 300,000 young jobseekers had been referred to the Work Programme, with just over a third (34%) having spent the necessary time in employment to lead to a job outcome payment.<sup>13</sup>

## Youth Contract

The Youth Contract is a package of schemes aimed at helping young people into sustained employment; launched in April 2012 it combined existing initiatives with new ones.

These included work experience placements lasting between two and eight weeks, a mixture of training, work experience and job interviews through sector-based work academies and extra support such as weekly, rather than fortnightly signing on meetings.

The most significant scheme within this package was the introduction of wage incentives of up to £2,275 for businesses hiring young people who had been unemployed for over six months.

While many of the other elements of the Youth Contract are still operational, enrolments on the wage incentive scheme ended in August 2014. Between April 2012 and August 2014 payments were made for 20,000 young people, with just under 10,000 payments to employers for individuals who had completed the full 26 weeks employment.<sup>14</sup>

## Youth Obligation

The latest in this series of back-to-work schemes aimed at addressing youth unemployment will be the introduction of a Youth Obligation. The Summer Budget 2015 set out:

*“From April 2017, young people will participate in an intensive regime of support from day one of their benefit claim, and after six months they will be expected to apply for an apprenticeship or traineeship, gain work-based skills, or go on a mandatory work placement to give them the skills they need to move into sustainable employment.”<sup>15</sup>*

## Jobcentre Plus

As well as the large scale programmes delivered, the lead body responsible for providing employment support to young people – Jobcentre Plus – has undergone a series of transformations in recent years.

Established between 2001 and 2003, Jobcentre Plus brought together two key functions within the social security system; administering working age benefits and providing public employment services through its network of 700 job centres.

A number of government reforms have affected the way job centres operate and the support they offer to young people.

In March 2012, the Welfare Reform Act was given Royal Assent, paving the way for one of the most radical transformations of the welfare system in 60 years. At the heart of these reforms was the introduction of Universal Credit which combines six existing benefits into one new payment.

The introduction of Universal Credit has meant not only the bringing together existing benefits, but has also established a number of reforms to how these are managed. These changes include the way that claims are managed and paid, the expectations on the claimant, the penalties for not meeting these expectations, and the overall amount they will receive.

As part of the roll-out of Universal Credit, Jobcentre Plus has introduced a new claimant commitment, which sets out what young people have agreed to do to prepare for and look for work.

Given Universal Credit covers claimants both in and out of work, the Department for Work and Pensions and job centres now have the power to require low-paid young people to take steps such as taking on more hours and applying for other jobs to increase their earnings.

# Findings

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## Introduction

The findings in this report are based on a series of focus groups held with young people who were either not in employment, education or training or who had recently experienced a period of unemployment.

The focus groups concentrated on three areas; their aspirations, the barriers they face finding work and the support they felt was needed to secure employment.

In discussing these areas, the overwhelming feelings expressed by the young people participating in the research were ones of frustration and dismay towards job centres and what they had to offer in terms of support for finding employment.

*“The thing with job centre is that they treat you like a four year old”*

Mohammad, Dartford

*“Job centres look down on you and belittle you”*

Beth, Derby

*“The job centre makes you feel like you’ve done something wrong”*

Eden, Grimsby

*“I don’t know what is more scary, going to sign-on or going to a dental appointment”*

Adam, Goole

*“Job centre is like a factory, you go in, sign-on, and then go out. It’s just like rinse and repeat, over and over again”*

Ramsay, High Wycombe

Far from being the voices of a few disgruntled individuals, these feelings towards job centres were shared by the overwhelming majority of young people participating in the research right across the country.

More than nine in 10 of individuals taking part in the focus groups believed that the support they were currently or previously receiving from their job centre was not helping them find employment.<sup>16</sup>

Based on the findings from the focus groups, the following sections seek to understand this sense of alienation that exists between young people and job centres and what measures they felt were necessary to transform the job centre and the wider social security system from a safety net to a springboard that helps them into employment.

## Understanding young people's circumstances

This sense of alienation among young people was driven in part by the perceived inability of staff at job centres to be able to understand and recognise an individual's circumstances. Many of the young people participating in the research felt that job centre staff were unable or unwilling to take into account their situations when they initially present seeking support.

*"The job centre staff don't take personal circumstances into consideration"*  
Lesley, Bedford

*"The job centre don't have any humanity, they are so robotic"*  
Kemisha, Birmingham

*"The job centre needs to stop treating everyone the same"*  
Jordan, North Tyneside

*"I want the job centre to be a bit more understanding"*  
Charlotte, Norwich

This inability to identify circumstances and conditions that could impact on an individual's ability to find work was linked to a number of interrelating factors. The first relates to the perceived attitude of job centre staff.

Many of those participating in the research felt that the staff working in job centres held negative preconceptions of the young people they were tasked with supporting and that this had a detrimental impact on the way they were being treated.

As well as this generating a growing sense of anger and frustration among young people, the negative way in which they felt they were treated by job centres impacted on the trust young people then placed in their work coaches. This lack of trust meant that young people often did not feel comfortable to share the barriers they faced finding employment with staff at job centres which inhibited their ability to find work.

*"I wouldn't share my health issues with the job centre"*  
Reece, Horsham

*"We need people we can trust"*  
Chanelle, Birmingham

*"If you are happy and able to speak to people, you are more likely to talk about the things you need to talk about"*  
Nathan, Exeter

*"For a lot of young people, going to the job centre is not a very personal experience"*  
Will, Exeter

However, even for those young people that felt comfortable to share and discuss their circumstances and conditions with their work coaches, many felt that suitable opportunities were not afforded to them.

The young people participating in the research felt this was as a result of both the limited amount of time they got to spend with work coaches and there not being adequate opportunities built into their meetings to talk about themselves and their situations. This was felt to be the case both during the initial assessment session as well as during the ongoing meetings and sign-on sessions.

The format and location of the meetings were also cited as not offering a suitable opportunity to share and discuss their circumstances. Young people felt the environment and open plan layout of job centres was not conducive to sharing personal circumstances, particularly when these related to their health or family situations.

The young people participating in the research felt in order to move from dependence to independence, they first need individuals around them on which they can depend. As the research shows, far from being this, staff at job centres were viewed by many young people with anger and frustration.

It must be noted that some young people taking part in the focus groups shared positive experiences of their relationship with their work coaches, but these were very much exception to the norm.

Given the recent change from advisors to work coaches seems to have little positive impact on how staff in job centres are viewed by young people, it was felt that more action is needed. To become people on whom they can depend and more effective at helping them into employment, there needs to be people working within job centres who understand young people and the situations they are facing.

*“I think job centre staff need more training to actually understand what the we are going through”*  
Olivia, Dartford

*“The job centre staff should be more like support workers”*  
Eden, Grimsby

Young people face a set of unique challenges when they are looking for work, it was therefore felt important that job centre staff were empathetic and were equipped to provide support to address these, with each area having work coaches trained and tasked with supporting young people specifically.

It was also felt that any reforms taken forward should ensure these work coaches remain consistent throughout the life of a young person's claim - including at their regular sign-on sessions. The young people taking part in the research felt this was important to build the trust that is currently lacking as well as in developing an understanding of them as individuals.

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with a specialist youth work coach which remains consistent throughout the length of their claim**

Despite the national roll out of the claimant commitment, it also seems to be business as usual in the assessments taking place for many of those young people claiming unemployment benefits. As was the case with the jobseeker's agreement, the claimant commitment process is still seen primarily as a one way process focussed on setting what is expected of those claiming benefits rather than enabling young people to raise the barriers they face finding work.

To be able to deliver the more personalised service that young people need, a more detailed assessment process needs to take place when developing young people's claimant commitments. Based on views expressed by the young people participating in the research, this needs to include dedicating more time to the initial assessment as well as ensuring this session encourages them to raise any barriers or obstacles they might face in looking for and taking up work so that job centres can help them to overcome these.

YMCA has recently been involved in a pilot to test a template letter, which young people can complete to inform their work coaches of any issues affecting them and their ability to look for work. Where this has been implemented effectively, YMCA has seen claimant commitments change to better reflect the young people's circumstances and sanctions fall. The success of this demonstrates that the current assessment process is failing to identify the barriers or obstacles young people are facing.

Given the sensitive and personal nature of what might be discussed during the assessment, it was also felt that young people should be presented the option of undertaking this in a more private location and where appropriate be permitted to bring a trusted individual with them into these meetings.

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with a more detailed initial assessment exploring their personal circumstances, which is then used to inform their claimant commitment**

## Listening to young people's aspirations

Based on the experiences of the young people gathered through the research, it was not only their circumstances that they felt were being overlooked by job centres, it was also their aspirations.

Rather than be a system in which aspirations are encouraged and can be realised, too often it was considered by young people that their aspirations were ignored and even quashed. This ranged from not being asked about what work they wished to do, through to their aspirations being completely dismissed when they did share them with their work coaches.

*"I told the job centre that I wanted to become an accountant, but they doubted me and just put me down for retail and warehouse work"*

Michael, Exeter

*"They do ask you what you want to do and type it up and everything, but after that it's done, they start their own thing"*

Dave, Norwich

*"It would be better if the job centre actually talked to you about what you want to do"*

Ashley, Horsham

*"If they actually did their research into young people's CVs and their past experience, then they could look for something that suits them"*

Adam, Goole

*"The job centre needs to really listen to young people to see what we want"*

Marcio, Bedford

The young people taking part in the research felt their aspirations were dismissed in favour of pushing them into any form of employment, regardless of how well suited they were for the roles or how short term these were.

The overriding factor for why young people felt their aspirations were being ignored was the pressure within job centres to focus on short term priorities and targets. Instead of addressing youth unemployment, it was felt the approach being taken by job centres was fostering a churn of young people going in and out of work, in a no-pay low-pay cycle.

*"You go to school for 11 years to get all these skills to go into a career, but then if you have to go into a job centre because you haven't got a job straight away, they don't care about that and your career, they just want you to work immediately in whatever job"*

Anton, Bedford

*"The job centre just wants you off Jobseeker's Allowance; they don't care about your future or helping you to build a career"*

Kemisha, Birmingham

*"The job centre just wants you short term out of their building, they don't think about your future"*

Emily, Horsham

An implication of taking this approach frequently cited in the focus groups was a growth in the numbers of young people who felt they were forced into short term and irrelevant agency roles. Whilst it was recognised these roles could help them gain work experience, more often than not it left them back at the job centre within a few weeks having made little progress towards their desired career.

*“Every time any of us go to sign on, job centres tell us we have to apply at these agencies. What is the point? They just give us work for a week and then clear us off”*  
Mitch, Derby

*“You can understand why job centres are using agencies, but it doesn’t help us find full time work”*  
Nick, Bedford

For job centres to become places young people trust and believe in, it was felt that they need to be focussed on their long term futures and helping build their careers. Based on the views expressed by the young people taking part in the research, this needs to start by giving them the opportunity to share their aspirations with their work coaches.

As outlined in the previous section of this report, despite the introduction of the claimant commitment, the initial assessment process is still seen by young people as not providing them with adequate opportunities to share their thoughts and opinions. In the context of young people’s aspirations, too often this resulted in their aspirations being marginalised from the very outset of their claims.

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with a detailed assessment exploring their aspirations, which is then used to inform their claimant commitment**

However, even where the long term aspirations of young people are being recognised, it was the belief of the young people contributing to the research that while off-flow targets (i.e. the number of people ending their claim) remain as the main form of accountability, their long term aspirations will always be seen as secondary in the eyes of those working in job centres.

For this reason, it was proposed that job sustainment replaces off-flows as the main target applied to job centres when working with young people.

**Recommendation: To introduce job sustainment measures as the primary means of assessing the success of work coaches and job centres in supporting young people into employment**

## Anton, Bedford

As the eldest of three children, Anton agreed to move out when his Mum was forced to downsize their home. It was a mutual agreement but neither could have known at the time just what the ramifications would be. Despite the path his life has taken him on, he is determined to find work as a computer programmer.

*“My mum was working a number of jobs when I was living at home but, despite this, she still couldn’t afford the rent on a three-bed house. She arranged with the council to downsize and, as I was the eldest of three, I agreed to move out.”*

*“I went to a few different places and then made a big mistake and ended up in prison. It was after this that I made it to YMCA and things started to change.”*

Determined to become a computer programmer, he enrolled at his local college in Luton on an IT course.

*“I wanted to look at software development and computer design.”*

*“I don’t have any great qualifications from school but this could have given me a chance to get where I wanted to be, which was to have my own place and a job.”*

However, three months in to his course, the job centre made him choose between quitting his course and remaining on benefits, or staying on at college but potentially losing his home. With no savings to his name, Anton says he had no choice.

*“I’m now limited to what I can do because I have no real qualifications. I’m certainly further back in my life than I would have been if I had stayed on my IT course.”*

*“Now all I can do is save money again to go back to college.”*

*“If I go through the job centre for support I have to do a course in retail and if I don’t attend that, I get sanctioned. That isn’t helping me get into computers.”*

*“You go to school for 11 years to get all these skills to go into a career, but then if you have to go into a job centre because you haven’t got a job straight away, they don’t care about that and your career, they just want you to work immediately in whatever job.”*

*“It’s really disappointing because I don’t feel like I’m going to be able to get a job now that I actually want to have.”*



## Supporting young people to look for work

Another driver for the frustration felt by young people with the job centre is the support provided when looking for employment.

For young people coming out of education, looking for work for the first time can prove a daunting experience. A lack of understanding and confidence in the process of looking for work was consistently raised during the focus groups as being a barrier to them finding employment.

*“I feel like when I came out of college and started to look for a job, I had no clue what I was doing”*

Jordan, Dartford

*“Not everyone knows how to prepare themselves properly”*

Chanelle, Birmingham

*“I think confidence can be an issue”*

Olivia, Dartford

Among the young people participating in the research, the problems faced with confidence were compounded by the large number of job applications they were making without any success or feedback.

*“I’ve applied for over 40 jobs and only one person has got back to me to say I haven’t got the interview”*

Reece, Horsham

*“They [employers] don’t give you feedback, how are you going to improve if they are not telling us where we are going wrong”*

Kemisha, Birmingham

*“I’ve had quite a few knock backs with work, and it doesn’t make you feel very good about yourself”*

Nik, Exeter

*“It makes you think you’re not good enough when you keep getting rejected”*

Sarah, Birkenhead

However, rather than be a place where young people feel they can go for support with these matters, those participating in the focus groups felt job centres were currently failing to offer the advice and training they felt that they needed.

*“I have received no help whatsoever to find a job, and I am no better off now than I was without the job centre six months ago”*

Ellie, Mansfield

*“Job centre doesn’t help you to look for work; you just get a note you sign on and that’s it”*

Liam, North Tyneside

*“I’ll say can you help me do a job search, and they’ll say they haven’t time”*

Katherine, Dartford

*“In the job centre it is hard to get five minutes with someone”*

Michael, Exeter

The recently announced intensive activity programme that young people will have to undertake within the first three weeks of submitting a claim, covering areas such as filling in job applications, good interview techniques and looking for a job, could be a positive step in addressing the basic skills they feel they lack when looking for work. As could the planned activity by job centre staff in providing careers advice and support in schools.

However, it was in the area of ongoing support from job centres that most people participating in focus groups felt more support was necessary. With employers largely unwilling to provide feedback on unsuccessful applications, job centres were identified as having the potential to play an important role in closing the feedback loop for young people.

To achieve this, rather than the current sign-on sessions taking place more frequently, young people felt that the opportunity to have more detailed meetings with their work coaches to go through and provide feedback on their CV and completed applications would be most beneficial in supporting them in the process of looking for work.

Those taking part in the research felt this could be achieved either in the form of longer sign-on sessions or through dedicated timeslots set aside each week where young people could come into a job centre, or other locations in the community, to spend more time with their work coaches to discuss the applications they were working on or had previously submitted.

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with more comprehensive regular sign-on sessions with their work coach**

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with regular opportunities to meet with their work coach at informal drop-in sessions**

## Getting young people the right skills and qualifications

Based on the findings from the focus groups, another of the key drivers for the frustration felt towards the job centres was the lack of support young people believed they received to help gain the skills and qualifications they need.

The concerns raised by the young people participating in the focus groups concentrated both on the overall availability of courses offered through job centres as well as the relevance of the courses available.

*“The amount of time I’ve asked for help to go on courses and it’s ‘I can’t help you’. How do you expect people to go back into work but you’re not going to give them help – I don’t get the job centre at all”*

John, Derby

*“If I go through the job centre for support I have to do a course in retail and if I don’t attend that, I get sanctioned. That isn’t helping me get into computers”*

Anton, Bedford

*“We need training tailored and specific to the work we want to do, not just throwing us on any random course or training just because it’s available”*

Shamsah, Bedford

*“The courses that I actually want to do, the job centre don’t do”*

Liam, North Tyneside

*“The job centre are forcing me to go on courses that aren’t relevant to me. It just feels like they are trying to hit their quota for getting people on courses”*

Ramsay, High Wycombe

This problem was felt to be particularly acute among those over the age of 18, for whom losing entitlement for funding for training presented an additional barrier to gaining skills and qualifications they felt they needed to find work.

*“Once you are past a certain age you have to pay, say if I want to go back to college or studying, I’d have to pay”*

Jordan, Dartford

*“I think the older you get, the harder it becomes in accessing support for training”*

Megan, Birkenhead

*“Once you reach 19, most of your funding for training is gone”*

Emily, Horsham

In addition to the availability of training opportunities open to those accessing the social security system, the inability to participate in training lasting for more than 16 hours a week while claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance was raised by those taking part in the focus groups as preventing young people from undertaking more significant training opportunities and gaining more meaningful qualifications.

*“I got offered a job but had to do training first, but because the training I needed was so many hours a week, I had to choose between finishing the training to get that job and keeping my house”*

Chloe, North Tyneside

Given the importance that having the right skills and qualifications are to securing sustained employment, the perceived failure of job centres to enable young people to access relevant training was understandably greeted with much frustration in the focus groups.

To help overcome these barriers, the view of those taking part in the focus groups was that job centres should be doing more to engage with them to identify and secure training in areas related to their aspirations.

To achieve this, it was felt that a support element should be clearly set out within claimant commitments, which should include training courses and qualifications agreed with their work coach that they will undertake to help find employment.

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with opportunities to have relevant training incorporated within their claimant commitment**

Building on this approach of collaboration, job centres need to be more open in the way it uses funding such as the Flexible Support Fund to assist young people who face financial barriers in accessing the training and qualifications they identify.

Work coaches should be transparent with young people about the funds available to support them into training, setting out a personal budget and discussing with young people on how this could be best utilised to help them into sustained employment.

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with options to discuss how available funding is utilised to enable them to participate in training**

To give young people a greater influence on the courses they are able to access, it was also felt important that some of restrictions on the time they could spend training while on benefits needed to be lifted.

Under current arrangements, individuals claiming Jobseeker's Allowance are unable to take part in education or training lasting more than 16 hours a week. Recognising this as being an issue, action has already been taken to remove the 16 hour rule for those undertaking a traineeship and it was the belief of the young people taking part in the focus groups that the same approach should be applied for any training they agree as being appropriate with their work coach.

All the evidence indicates that those young people with higher level qualifications are more likely to find sustained and better paying roles, yet the social security system is currently designed in a way that limits the opportunities of those out of work to get these qualifications.

Lifting the 16 hour rule would enable those young people lacking skills and qualifications to participate in more substantial training courses and gain more applicable qualifications that could drastically improve their chances of finding employment.

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with the ability to participate in education or training lasting for more than 16 hours a week without affecting their claim**

## Chloe, North Tyneside

Unemployed but desperate to work, Chloe was offered her “dream job” as carer, something which she had been doing for her mum from the age of 11. However, to secure the role, she had to complete a training scheme.

*“I got offered a job as a carer but had to do training first.”*

*“I had three days left of my course when I was told by the job centre that I would lose my benefits because I was training for longer than the 16 hours permitted per week.”*

*“I was told to effectively choose between my job or my home and I had no choice but to choose the home.”*

*“I asked staff in the job centre over and over again to just let me finish the course but they said it wasn’t an option.”*

*“My course was just one hour longer than the 16 permitted per week but if I had been allowed to complete it, my life would have changed completely.”*

Since missing out on the role, Chloe’s progress has faltered. She has recently been sanctioned, lost her benefits and is now struggling to pay her rent. Despite this, Chloe is continuing to look for work.

*“I’m still applying for jobs every day. However, it’s not easy going for five jobs a day, knowing that I’ll get turned down again and again. It’s hard for your mental health.”*

*“If I had completed the training I would be in employment now and off benefits, so I’ve actually gone a step back.”*

## Securing young people with meaningful work experience

One of the most frequently raised reasons for the frustration felt towards job centres focused on the issue of work experience.

The young people taking part in the research recognised the important role that having meaningful work experience could have on the prospects of them finding employment. However, it was the appreciation of its significance alongside job centres' inability to assist them in finding such opportunities that was the cause of much frustration amongst young people.

*"A lot of it is about experience, but how is someone supposed to get a job if you don't give them the chance to get experience?"*

Jade, Dartford

*"Everyone is looking for experienced workers, but how are we going to be experienced workers when no one is giving out experience"*

Kane, Norwich

*"We are young, we're not going to have the experience yet, but if no one is going to give it us, how are we going to get it"*

Beth, Derby

Where work experience was available through job centres, too often the young people participating in the focus groups suggested this was in areas unrelated to the work they wanted to do.

*"I think the job centre should help us find work experience in different sectors, not just retail"*

Katherine, Dartford

*"It would be good if there were volunteering placements in the sectors we want to work in"*

Henry, Norwich

*"The job centre don't have links into the types of work we want to do"*

Marcio, Bedford

To address these shortcomings, it was the view of the young people taking part in the research that action was necessary. As was the case in relation to getting young people the right skills and qualifications, this should include job centres better engaging with them to identify and secure work experience placements that were consistent to their aspirations and the types of work they were looking to do.

Similarly to training, it was felt to achieve this that a support element should be clearly set out within the claimant commitment process to allow young people to discuss and agree work experience they would wish to undertake to help find employment. Having identified and agreed this with their work coaches, it would be their task to source relevant opportunities on behalf of the young people.

However, to be able to achieve what young people were looking for, it was recognised that job centres needed to do more to create links with local business and employers. Despite the range of work experience initiatives introduced with job centres over the past few years, the experience of the young people participating in the research was that opportunities made available to them still primarily revolved around retail.

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with opportunities to have relevant work experience incorporated within their claimant commitment**

## Retaining support for young people transitioning into employment

For many young people the transition into employment after school or following a period of unemployment is a simple one. However, those contributing to the research felt there was little recognition of difficulties some young people face when they first enter into a work place, both when going into their first job after school, as well as after a long period out of work.

*“It is a lot more nerve racking for young people to go into a job”*

Emily, Horsham

*“After spending so much time not working, going into something full time can be stressful and a shock to the system”*

Michael, Exeter

*“Being out of work for so long, going back to work is quite daunting”*

Nathan, Exeter

It was felt by the young people participating in the research that the limited support that was available disappeared completely once they found work, which in some cases left them vulnerable to falling short of the expectations required of them and at risk of becoming unemployed again.

To address a situation whereby young people lose support at such a critical period of their progression, the young people contributing to the research advocated having the option of transitional support in place for them when they first entered work.

*“Having a mentor when I actually go into work to talk about things with. Support that helps you into work and then eventually fades out”*

Emily, Horsham

*“Having someone there like a coach helping you back into work would be good”*

Nik, Exeter

The young people involved in the focus groups felt having someone consistent they could go to for more informal advice and support in the first few weeks after entering into work would remove the stress involved in this transition and increase the likelihood of them staying in employment.

With the requirement under Universal Credit on job centres to provide in work conditionality for those working in low paid or part time work, they are now going to be better placed to provide young people with this form of support.

**Recommendation: To provide each young person with the opportunity to receive in work support from their work coach or a designated mentor when they transition into employment**

# Conclusions and Recommendations

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Unemployment remains a critical issue for young people and the country as a whole, as such the Government is right to recognise that more needs to be done to tackle it. Contrary to much of the rhetoric surrounding those young people accessing the social security system, the reality is that most young people who find themselves out of work desperately want to find employment.

However, rather than preparing and helping young people find work, in many cases the existing job centre arrangements merely dehumanise those who access its services, damaging their confidence and in some cases even setting back their journey into employment.

Despite a range of well-intentioned schemes being put in place by successive governments, many young people are continuing to be prescribed the same generic support, regardless of their circumstances and aspirations. This is creating a significant discordance between how young people view the service being provided and what governments believe they offer.

Young people have within them the desire to work, train and gain experience, but rather than stimulate this desire, current job centre practices stifle these vital elements of addressing the unemployment crisis. By failing to listen to young people and take a broad view of the problems they face finding work, the solutions offered will only ever be patchy at best, which as the research shows, is currently the case for many accessing job centres.

If job centres are to improve their offer to young people, their aspirations need to match those of the individuals accessing their services. Job centres need to be focused on helping individuals to find sustained employment and build lasting careers, not merely providing short-term fixes and seeking to end their claims.

To do this, we have to free job centres from the targets and time constraints that restrict them from providing tailored support that young people need. Tackling the existing problem also requires an investment in job centre staff to equip them with the skills they need to address the unique challenges that young people face.

While examples of good practices do exist, the research illustrates that these are few and far between and that job centres across the country are not currently providing young people with the employment support they need.

It is clear that in their current form that job centres are failing to fulfil one of their two key roles - providing public employment services. The research shows that young people are not seeing their local job centres as a place they can go to get support for finding a job, but simply as a benefit processing office.

Significant reforms are needed to transform job centres from a safety net that simply provides financial support into a springboard that helps young people find employment.

To tackle the sense of alienation and in turn address the high levels of young unemployment, a new approach towards young people within the job centres is therefore needed.

While this need for change seems to be broadly recognised across the political spectrum, much of the focus in recent years has been on increasing conditionality and what claimants are expected to do. However, by focusing on getting young people to do more to look for work, the importance of supplementing this with effective employment support has been lost or not translated into action at a local level.



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If the Government is serious about addressing the issue of youth unemployment and transforming the social security system **from a safety net to a springboard**, YMCA is proposing that the new Youth Obligation be matched with **an obligation on job centres**.

To be effective in supporting young people into employment, this obligation and the support offered by job centres needs to be underpinned by the following key themes emerging from the research: -

- ▶ **Listening to and engaging young people** – Job centres need to become places where young people are treated like humans, listened to and have a say in designing the support they receive.
- ▶ **Providing a personalised service to each young person** – Job centres need to recognise that every young person is different and the support they provide should reflect these differences.
- ▶ **Concentrating on the long term future of young people** – Job centres need to focus on building young people's skills and experience and support them to find sustained employment.

The obligation should also commit job centres to providing each young person accessing its services with: -

- ▶ **A more detailed initial assessment exploring their personal circumstances and aspirations, which is then used to inform their claimant commitment.**
- ▶ **A specialist youth work coach which remains consistent throughout the length of their claim.**
- ▶ **More comprehensive regular sign-on sessions with their work coach.**
- ▶ **Regular opportunities to meet with their work coach at informal drop-in sessions.**
- ▶ **Opportunities to have relevant training and work experience incorporated within their claimant commitment.**
- ▶ **Options to discuss how available funding is utilised to enable them to participate in training.**
- ▶ **The ability to participate in education or training lasting for more than 16 hours a week without affecting their claim.**
- ▶ **In work support from their work coach or a designated mentor when they transition into employment.**

To ensure job centres remain focussed on the long term interests of the young people they work with, YMCA is also proposing the obligation introduces: -

- ▶ **Job sustainment as the primary means of assessing the success of work coaches and job centres in supporting young people into employment.**

# Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Between April and June 2002, there 388,000 young people (aged 18-24 years old) in the UK who were unemployed, by April to June 2006 this had risen to 513,000. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Aug 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Between October and December 2011, there were 826,000 young people (aged 18-24 years old) in the UK who were unemployed. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Aug 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Between April and June 2015, there were 591,000 young people (aged 18-24 years old) in the UK who were unemployed, an unemployment rate of 14.3%. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Aug 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Between April and June 2015, 871,000 young people (aged 18-24 years old) were not in employment, education or training. (Source: Office for National Statistics – Aug 2015)

<sup>5</sup> In July 2015, 151,000 young people (aged 18-24 years old) were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance and 30,000 were claiming Universal Credit while unemployed. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Aug 2015)

<sup>6</sup> In July 2015, 181,000 young people (aged 18-24 years old) were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or Universal Credit (while unemployed), of which 128,000 (71%) had claims lasting for less than six months. Over the same time period, 440,000 25-49 year olds were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or Universal Credit (while unemployed), of which 249,000 (57%) had claims lasting for less than six months. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Aug 2015)

<sup>7</sup> Between April and June 2015, 146,000 young people (aged 18-24 years old) had been unemployed for more than 12 months. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Aug 2015)

<sup>8</sup> In July 2015, 20,600 young people (aged 18-24 years old) had Jobseeker's Allowance claims lasting more than 12 months. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Aug 2015)

<sup>9</sup> Official Statistics indicated that between October 2009 and March 2011, just over 105,000 jobs were created under the Future Jobs Fund, with the programme costing approximately £680 million. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Oct 2011)

<sup>10</sup> A study into the impacts, costs and benefits of the Future Jobs Fund found that at 104 weeks following the start of their Future Jobs Fund job, participants were less likely to be in receipt of welfare support by 7 percentage points (or 16% less likely) and more likely to be in unsubsidised employment by 11 percentage points (or 27% less likely) per participant than they would have been had they not participated. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Nov 2012)

<sup>11</sup> A study into the impacts, costs and benefits of the Future Jobs Fund estimated that the net cost to the Exchequer of the programme was approximately £3,100 per participant. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Nov 2012)

<sup>12</sup> Source: BBC – Mar 2011

<sup>13</sup> Between June 2011 and March 2015, 299,000 18 to 24 years on Jobseeker's Allowance were referred to the Work Programme. 102,000 of these spent the necessary time in employment to lead to job outcome payment being issued. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Jun 2015)

<sup>14</sup> Between April 2012 and August 2014, payments were made for 20,030 individuals with 9,660 payments to employers for individuals who had completed the full 26 weeks employment. (Source: Department for Work and Pensions – Feb 2015)

<sup>15</sup> Chancellor George Osborne's Summer Budget 2015 speech (Source: HM Treasury – Jul 2015)

<sup>16</sup> When asked 'Do you think the support currently or previously provided to you by the job centre is helping you find work?' 91% (n = 50) of the focus group participants answered no. (YMCA – Aug 15)



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YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

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