

## Consultation response

### The Future of Jobcentre Plus – Evidence for the Work and Pensions Committee from Young Women's Trust

#### 1. Introduction

- 1.1. Young Women's Trust is pleased to respond to the Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into the future of Jobcentre Plus (JCP). As a charity which works closely with young women to support them into employment, we recognise the vital role of JCP in young women's job seeking.
- 1.2. Most of our evidence for this submission comes from a survey, which we undertook to inform our response to this consultation, of young women aged 16-30 who have had experience of the Jobcentre. We are grateful to all who responded, including our Work It Out service users (see 2.3.) who volunteered their stories – good and bad – about their experience with Jobcentre Plus. These survey results and case studies supplement information from our service evaluations and existing policy research, *Scarred for Life* (2015) and *Making apprenticeships work for young women* (2016), into young women's unemployment and skills.
- 1.3. We hope that the insights from our own research and from our service provision can be taken as a basis for improving future JCP services. Sadly it is clear that far many young women are being failed by JCP, something which we believe needs to be addressed urgently.

#### 2. About Young Women's Trust

- 2.1. Young Women's Trust supports and represents women aged 16-30 struggling to live on low or no pay in England and Wales and who are at risk of being trapped in poverty. The charity offers free coaching and personalised advice on job applications, conducts research, runs campaigns and works with young women to advocate for fair financial futures.
- 2.2. One million young women aged 16-30 face a lifetime of growing financial, social and emotional disadvantage because they are struggling to live on low or no pay, and are locked out of opportunities that could transform their lives. This is a longstanding problem, which continues to have far reaching consequences not only for the young women themselves but for wider society.

- 2.3. Young Women's Trust runs an employment support service called Work It Out. Work It Out has two arms. One is a free telephone coaching service which uses solution-focused coaching methods to help 18-30 year old women build confidence and take steps towards work. The second is a service whereby young women can submit their job applications through Young Women's Trust to HR professionals and receive personalised feedback within 5 working days.

### 3. Young women's employment support needs

- 3.1. Young Women's Trust's experience both as a service provider and research and campaigning organisation has convinced us of the need for organisations providing employment support, including Jobcentre Plus, to consider the personal situations and practical capabilities of the young women they support. Done in this way employment-related support has the potential to improve each young women's employability in terms of both skills and confidence. However, such support must not replace the need to also address the systemic problems which mean there is a lack of the type of flexible, secure work that pays enough to live on.
- 3.2. Between April 2015 and April 2016, 200 young women used Young Women's Trust Work It Out coaching service. 75% of these women were living in London and the South East, which reflects our main form of outreach as a young service, through jobcentres in these areas. 67% of these young women were from ethnic minority backgrounds and 97% came from the top third most deprived households in the UK. The young women using Work it Out are a diverse, yet we see several themes in their support needs:
- **CV and application writing.** Most young women are not practiced at writing applications which demonstrate their abilities. This is why Young Women's Trust have set up a service that provides personalised feedback on individual job applications.
  - **Direction.** Many of the young women who come to us are unsure what they can do or want to do for work. Clients often say that they just want to 'talk to someone' about their options. This tallies with Young Women's Trust *Scarred for Life* report which found that young women receive gendered and perfunctory careers advice, which becomes hard to access once they leave education.
  - **Confidence and mental health.** Women are more likely than men to have a common mental health problem and twice as likely to suffer from anxiety.<sup>1</sup> Poor confidence and mental health prevent a significant amount of young women taking practical steps to find work; both also degenerate as young women spend more time unemployed. We use solution focused coaching as a necessary first step before

---

<sup>1</sup> Mental Health Foundation <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-men-and-women> (accessed 21 April 2016).

they can be expected to seek work. We also refer young women with significant mental health problems to an appropriate professional.

- **Practical crisis.** Some of the women we speak to have their basic safety threatened – for instance, by domestic violence or housing insecurity. Seeking work is extremely difficult when these desperate needs are not being addressed. Jobcentre Plus advisors, given enough face-to-face time with claimants, are in a good position to spot these needs and refer young women onto expert support before pressuring them to find work.

3.4. These themes suggest to us that future design of employment-related support in the Jobcentre needs to have the following:

- Adequate time for one to one advice and discussion about a range of employment options open to young women
- JCP coaches who are able to identify problems with confidence and health, and the threat of harm for young women and be able to refer them to others who have time and expertise to support them.
- Personalised careers advice

#### 4. Young women's experience of Jobcentre Plus

4.1. Our experience at Young Women's Trust shows that while some young women have a positive experience with Jobcentre Plus, most tell us that the advice and support they receive from the Jobcentre does not meet the needs we describe above. In our *Scarred for Life* inquiry Young Women's Trust encountered criticism of the Jobcentre Plus from organisations and young women. One national charity told us "Young people refer to JCP as Jobcentre Minus – they don't find it has anything to offer them." This sentiment is echoed in research by YMCA England and Centrepoin which shows that young people – especially vulnerable ones – feel frustrated at the way they are treated by the Jobcentre.<sup>2</sup>

4.2. Throughout April 2016 Young Women's Trust conducted a survey of young women aged 16-30 with experience of the Jobcentre Plus. In total 94 young women responded and the findings should be taken as indicative rather than representative of the whole group of young women using the Jobcentre aged 16-30. Nonetheless they support the analysis of our previous research:

- The majority of young women who had used the Jobcentre did not like meeting their JCP adviser (73%).

---

<sup>2</sup> YMCA England (2015) *Safety Net or Springboard?*; Institute for Employment Studies, for Centrepoin (2016) *Tackling unemployment among disadvantaged young people.*

- Although some said their meetings with JCP coaches had kept them motivated or given them useful information about jobs/training, the majority of young women (64%) said that their meetings with JCP coaches are not helpful at all.

### **Inadequate Advice**

- 4.3. The main theme that arises from young women's experience is the inadequate advice they receive while job seeking. Some receive no advice, and others get inconsistent or counterproductive information.

*"They just advised me to look for jobs through the website and I had to prove each week that I had looked for jobs. They invited me to a job fair. They did not actually help me find a job and the fair was not relevant to my qualifications or career goals."* Anon

*"I was made to enrol on a full time college course for a qualification lower than a GCSE which would have cost me a full weekly travel card to get to and from, and left me no time to look for actual work. I eventually lied and said I'd found a job so I didn't have to go on the course, and then went for a few months scraping every penny, not eating and walking/cycling everywhere until I found a job."* Sara, 24.

### **Hostility from advisers**

- 4.4. Young women also note a sense of disinterest or active hostility from advisers.

*"I put in a complaint about an extremely sexist member of staff in their employment 6 months ago. Nothing was done and I still have to see him every week."* Lisa, 23

*"I've had meetings with extremely rude job coaches that have left me in tears. It would be nice to be made to feel like more of a person."* Clementine, 28.

### **Lack of understanding of mental and physical health needs**

- 4.4. Another theme is about advisers' inability to cope with the mental and physical health reasons that might impact a young woman's ability to search for work, and what work is available to them. For instance, Natasha 24, from South East London has mixed feedback about the Jobcentre. She has a disability and was originally claiming ESA, but when that claim was stopped for reasons she is unclear about, she had to begin claiming JSA. She is pleased that the Jobcentre referred her to Shaw Trust (where she is now getting support) but before she started there the Jobcentre was 'just horrible'. She dreaded going in and describes the situation as 'going round and round and round' because they didn't know what to do with her. In terms of listening, they didn't really help. Natasha didn't want to take just any job 'What's the point if I'm going to be unhappy in three months?' Other young women claiming ESA support her experience:

*"I find them very vague when it comes to mental health issues and feel they need to help people suffering more." Sophie, 25.*

*"I received no guidance or help that I was initially promised to get me confident and ready for when my medical came up to sign off ESA and start JSA to look for work... I'm still not work ready having received no help and support since September 2015!" Stacey, 24.*

### **Positive stories**

- 4.5. We do hear some happy stories. Nikki (19, Doncaster) studied Public Services at college. After finishing her course in June 2015 she started claiming Job Seekers' Allowance in September. Her work coach put her on a work experience programme at the Jobcentre between October and December, where she developed her skills in admin and analysed how long Jobcentre advisors spent with claimants across South Yorkshire. Meanwhile, her JCP work coach gave her personalised feedback on apprenticeship and job applications. Nikki has just been offered a customer service job with her local council. She credits her practical experience and support at the Jobcentre with helping her secure the job.
- 4.5. Young Women's Trust understand that no service can please all of its users. However, the level of feedback describing JCP as incompetent or unpleasant is worrying when it is the main source of support for young women who badly need guidance in seeking work. We recommend that the Department of Work and Pensions consults more extensively with young women and listens to their views – something we would be happy to help facilitate. We also suggest that future design of JCP services addresses the extremely ingrained negative perception that young women (and young people in general) have of the Jobcentre.

## **5. What young women say about future Jobcentre Plus initiatives**

- 5.1. We have spoken to young women about their opinions on proposals to improve the role the JCP plays in providing employment support. We can use their experiences and views to draw conclusions about the digital transformation of Universal Credit, frequency of interviews, and co-location of services. Our previous research about young women's worklessness and apprenticeships also sheds light on plans to provide careers advice for 12-18 year olds.

### **Digital and Universal Credit**

- 5.2. The Department for Work and Pensions is moving more stages of the benefits claim process online under Universal Credit. Young Women's Trust has been concerned that for some from disadvantaged backgrounds access to the internet might be an obstacle. Yet for most of the young women we surveyed, this was not the case. 86% said they had regular, easy access to the internet. Given that this survey was distributed online this is to be expected. However there will be young women who cannot access the

internet easily. The Department of Work and Pensions should have a back-up plan for these women so that they are able to continue seeking work and claiming benefits.

### Frequency of interviews

- 5.3. It has been suggested that unemployed claimants in the early stages of their claim will have to attend interviews with a JCP adviser more frequently than at present – and possibly daily. We asked young women what daily meetings would mean for them.
- A fifth (22%) thought this might increase the number of applications they did, but almost a third (29%) said it would decrease it.
  - 53% said it would decrease their standard of health and wellbeing.
  - 78% said it would increase the amount that they spent on travel.
- 5.4. In young women’s evidence to us, there is a consensus that making job seekers go to the Job Centre every day to prove that they are actively looking for work would be a burden. Many respondents talked about how this would have a negative impact on their mental health.

*“They would stress me out. Just thinking about it makes me anxious.” Malia, 25*

*“I wouldn't have time for anything else and I'd be even more stressed out - I have mental health conditions (including PTSD) that make it difficult to get in every two weeks - every day would be impossible.” Emily, 25*

*“It is unnecessary and takes away the time there is to be job searching independently.” Katy 28*

Other young women were able to see how daily visits could be useful, if the time was used for genuine training/development.

*“Would daily meeting include various training opportunities and short courses? If so then it will be a lot more beneficial.” Kelly, 28*

*“If they actively helped you look for jobs rather than review what you have done since your last visit it might help.” Anon*

*These daily meetings would only be effective, if the job centre advisor could really sit down with you one on one and help you look for and apply for jobs. Rachel, 26*

However, based on the existing service that JCP offers, Young Women’s Trust has serious concerns about daily contact with a service which alienates young people and does not succeed in its aims of supporting young women into work.

### Co-location

- 5.4. Young Women’s Trust proposed a list of services that could be located in the same building as the Jobcentre. Survey respondents could pick multiple options. The most

popular options were housing and other council services; money advice; and Citizen's Advice Bureaux. A number of young women expressed an interest in counselling and talking therapies located alongside existing JCP services, indicating that poor mental health and confidence are present in young female jobseekers.

Young women also suggested other services:

*Actual education providers. Not the ones running their 'training courses', but for 'proper courses' (GCSEs, A Levels, BTECs, NVQs etc.)* Maddie, 26.

*Daily CV and cover letter advice classes; having employers coming in on a regular basis to speak to potential candidates; on the spot interviews.* Maria, 21.

*Volunteering/social action and other charities.* Kate, 24.

There was also opposition to the idea. 20% said none of the services we suggested should be co-located with JCP. In the comments, some respondents explicitly criticised the idea. This criticism was bound up with the idea that association with JCP would erode people's trust in those services.

It is evident that there is a desire for a holistic service through JCP that supports young women with other aspects of their lives which act as barriers to employment. However it is important to also address the underlying issue of a lack of trust in JCP if this approach is to be successful.

### **Careers advice for 12-18 year olds**

- 5.5. Young Women's Trust are concerned that young women receive sparse careers advice, and when they do that it is narrow and gendered.<sup>3</sup> For instance, we know that gendered careers stereotypes are present in children from a young age. Girlguiding UK's Girls' Attitudes Survey 2015 showed that the majority of girls aged 7-10 said they were better than boys at looking after children, cooking and caring. Given that, we welcome moves to improve the amount and quality of advice for 12-18 year olds, so long as it challenges stereotypes.
- 5.6. We also think that gender segregation in the labour market could be tackled in part by advertising a range of apprenticeships and other career paths to young men and women in schools. Gender segregation is already a problem in apprenticeships. In 2014 there were 74 men starting an apprenticeship in plumbing for every woman. Similarly for every female apprentice entering the construction sector in England there were 56 men. Role models such as female construction workers and engineers and male carers and hairdressers need to be brought into schools and colleges to encourage young people

---

<sup>3</sup> Young Women's Trust (2015) *Scarred for Life?*

try roles not traditionally associated with their gender. Positive action by employers, including taster sessions and mentoring programmes, as well as adequate support for women male dominated sectors can also support women to move into and maintain positions in these sectors.<sup>4</sup>

- 5.7. We recommend that, for those over 18, JCP looks at improving the careers advice it makes available for young female job seekers, both through direct provision and referral to other agencies. We have previously found that young women are in the main unaware of the National Careers Service, and recommend that it should be better publicised in areas with high levels of young people NEET. We also recommend that providers of careers information, advice and guidance should be trained to deliver advice that supports young women to retrain or to enter jobs which are available locally, are secure and pay sufficiently.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

- 6.1. Young Women's Trust is concerned that current JCP services are not meeting young female jobseekers' needs. This undermines the confidence young women have in the service and ultimately the effectiveness with which it is able to deliver employment outcomes. JCP must address these underlying problems in its current service as well as offering new elements to broaden its scope. Whilst the idea of frequent interviews at JCP is not popular with young women, we hope that co-location and a new careers advice could improve the service JCP gives to young people.

In summary we recommend the following:

### 6.2. Creating a more holistic service

JCP needs to better address the broad range of young women's employment related support needs. The women we work with often lack direction, have poor confidence and mental health, and need help writing CVs and applications. Some are at risk of harm. JCP would be better able adapting and extending the existing service by:

- Allowing adequate time for one to one advice and discussion about a range of employment options open to young women.
- Training JCP coaches to spot confidence, health and safety problems in young women and referring them to others who have time and expertise to support them.
- Providing personalised careers advice which allows young women to develop and follow long term career plans

- 6.3. **Young women's experience of JCP.** The majority of young women who had used the Jobcentre did not like meeting their JCP adviser (73%). They also report to us that advisers give poor or conflicting advice, are actively hostile, and are unable to support those with mental or physical disabilities. This is deeply concerning, given the central

---

<sup>4</sup> Young Women's Trust (2016) *Making apprenticeships work for young women.*

role of JCP in young women's job searches. Involving young women more directly in the design of the service and offering opportunities to provide feedback without fear of sanction is critical both in improving the service and restoring young women's trust.

- 6.4. **Future Jobcentre Plus initiatives.** A key focus in designing the future JCP service must be to ensure the basic elements of the existing service work effectively, that the service meets the wide range of support needs and restores the trust of young people. The new elements proposed are likely to be successful to varying degrees in helping to meet these objectives.
- **Digital claims process.** 86% of young women said they had regular, easy access to the internet. This emphasises that digital sign on is easy for most and is likely improve the experience of accessing JCP. However there are still a significant number of people for whom digital access would be difficult and there needs to be a clear alternative in place.
  - **Daily interviews.** Young women said daily interviews at JCP would increase the amount they had to pay for travel and increase their problems with stress and poor mental health. There was also conflicting views about whether it would help with young women's job seeking with a significant number of women saying it would likely have a detrimental effect. It is recommended that this option be reconsidered in light of this evidence.
  - **Co-location.** Housing and council services, money advice, Citizens' Advice Bureaux, CV writing classes, counselling and formal education providers (NVQs, GCSEs etc) were some of the services young women thought would be useful to have nearby the JCP. Increasing access to these services through JCP would complement the work of the core service and help to address wider needs. However it is important that the underlying issue of a lack of trust young women have in JCP is addressed to avoid tainting these services by association.

**For further information please contact:**

**Emma Mckay**

Senior Policy Officer

[emma.mckay@youngwomenstrust.org](mailto:emma.mckay@youngwomenstrust.org)

020 7600 7451