

Signing on

Experiences of worklessness in Birmingham

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Executive summary

This report maps the journeys of Birmingham residents seeking work in the second half of 2010 and reflecting on their experiences, makes recommendations for how employability support could be changed in the future – both to improve the rate of jobseekers find work and to save the public purse money.

The commissioners, Birmingham's Working Neighbourhoods Fund and Local Government Improvement and Development, wanted to understand the lived experience of being out of work, the root causes of local people's worklessness and why some individuals disengaged with employability schemes before they found work. In the second half of 2010 we therefore carried out in depth interviews and 'day-in-the-life-of' studies with job seekers, as well as interviews with the employability support agencies.

Our findings focus on the most pertinent insights. We consider:

- What daily life is like living in Birmingham a being out of work: we describe the communities of Washwood Heath and Shard End and the tensions and conflicts in both.
- How workless people described the experience of being unemployed in East Birmingham: we discuss the different needs of mothers returning to work, young people, those with criminal convictions, those with poor literacy and those with mental health issues. Each should be receiving personalised and tailored support, but they rarely are. We also chart the struggles with managing money, travel, keeping confidence up and depression which were reoccurring themes amongst many interviewees.
- People's notions of and understanding of work: we recount people's ambitions for permanent, stable jobs, which is quite the opposite of their experience of short term contracts, poor working conditions and difficulties managing the realities of work like receiving negative feedback.
- The work of agencies determined to support local people back into work: the almost universal fear and dislike of the Job Centre amongst the workless, the key link between work experience and finding work; and the best and worst efforts of the different employability support schemes in Birmingham trying to help people back into the jobs market.
- The social support for work: the realities that most people find employment through word of mouth not reading the jobs board; that without a supportive family job hunting can be impossible and the importance of good role models to stay motivated.

This research was commissioned to build a better picture of the underlying issues of worklessness in order to develop a range of new options for supporting those out of work. Although there is a great deal of good quality provision happening already, there are also gaps and services which the interviewees found difficult

to engage with. We suggest that there is much Birmingham City Council and its partners can be doing now from reducing the confusion and overlap that exists amongst the current employability support services provision to developing better pathways and targeted support for clients with specific needs, to utilising social networks and support in job seeking. There are also a series of 'preventative activities' that require more investment: like improving work experience at school, improving careers advice and developing support for mums returning to work or ex offenders coming out of prison.

But Birmingham is not alone in facing these challenges. As the government cuts funding for employability support and rolls out the Single Work Programme (SWP), we suggest a number of recommendations for the raft of new providers who will soon be delivering employability support. These include:

- Using the SWP framework to simplify the pathways of provision for job seekers, putting an end to the fragmented and often duplicated local provision which all too often focuses on CV improvement.
- Redoubling efforts to create apprenticeships and in work training opportunities to get job seekers experience in the workplace whilst building their skills base.
- Using the SWP as an opportunity to work with families, not just with individuals. We know that confidence and motivation of job seekers ebbs and flows, but that social support structures are vital for confidence and social networks are vital for job seeking. Employability support which understand the context of the job seeker is important.
- Strengthening any payment by results model under the SWP to incentivise work with groups of jobseekers whose needs are currently largely unmet: mothers returning to work, ex-offenders, those with mental health issues and, all too often, young people.
- Not forgetting investment in labour demand' ie creating jobs, whilst the SWP focuses on improving the quality of 'labour supply'.

PART I

Setting the scene

Introduction

For every five jobseekers that are engaged in supported employability schemes in Birmingham, the City Council estimates that just one person goes into work. This is a pattern that is repeated all over the county. Despite all the regeneration efforts, the government funded job placements schemes, the boom years of construction and public sector expansion, the national unemployment rate never dropped below 6 per cent. And now we face a very different economic climate. Public sector budget cuts became a reality this year with the coalition government's comprehensive spending review (CSR) announcements. As Birmingham City Council looks to cut £320m from its books in less than four years, there will inevitably be less money around to support employability schemes. So how can the council and other partners best invest their resources in the future?

In the spring of 2010 Birmingham City Council's Development Directorate and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) commissioned the Young Foundation to take a very different look at the challenge of worklessness and the success of employability schemes in addressing it. Using in depth interviews and 'day-in-the-life-of' studies with 40 local jobseekers, we focused on employability from the point of view of the individual rather than the service provider. In particular, we wanted to understand the lived experience of being out of work, the root causes of local people's worklessness and why some individuals disengaged with employability schemes before they found work.

The stories we uncovered are a fascinating, and at times painful, read. They tell of the importance of family and friends in finding work, the need for role models and mentors and the importance of feeling heard. They also cast a light over the crushing pain of rejection, the guilt at not being able to provide and the isolation many feel in their job hunt. Each story is different – while some job seekers are highly motivated, many feel there is no point trying to change 'their lot in life'; some live well below the poverty line, others are surviving through other means; some have been out of work for just a few months, others for many years.

These are just 40 of the many stories to be told from job seekers in Washwood Heath and Shard End. But the value of this research does not come from the research numbers – this will never be a representative sample, nor offer a detailed evaluation of each service provider and the support they offer. Instead, the value comes in immersing yourself in the day-to-day reality of these people's lives – using the information to prompt new thinking. It is a fundamental change in the way that services are designed which starts from understanding the experiences, behaviours and lives of the end user. For strategic employment support stakeholders and those managing the Working Neighbourhoods Fund, the research is an investment in building a better picture of the underlying issues of

worklessness in order to develop a range of new options for supporting those out of work in the hard years which the city now looks set to face.

The second half of this report is devoted to 20 of the stories from workless people in Birmingham. They detail the individual circumstances and experiences of the people we spent time with. You can begin with our analysis of these stories, as the report is laid out, or you can start from the back with the stories themselves, make up your own mind on what is important and compare this to our analysis. Either way, we encourage you to read the stories themselves as they provide a fascinating insight into what it is like trying to find work in Birmingham in a time of economic uncertainty.

2 Research approach

Nationally much is already known about worklessness and employability service provision. Aspects of worklessness such as the relationship between worklessness and place, worklessness and social housing and financial disincentives to return to work have been well documented. And yet worklessness not only persists, but is on the rise again as the economy falters. Employability service providers will face an increasing demand for their services, but may not have any new answers.

We wanted to dig deeper – to unpack some of the often-used terms and definitions and really understand what people’s lives were like. We did this by spending a day in a workless person’s shoes, hanging out with them, observing everything from how they negotiated Jobcentre Plus to how they found the money for the bus fare to get there. During this time we explored five key questions around experiences of unemployment and employment services available to them. Specifically we considered:

- what motivated them to engage with employability schemes?
- what causes them to disengage?
- what are their perceptions of work?
- what are their experiences of worklessness and their attitudes to work and opportunity?
- what in their life experiences, including family relationships and peer pressures, can help or hinder their pathways to employment?

It is important to note that our study focused on the experiences of the people who are looking for work. It is not an evaluation of services available or a comparison between different providers. Rather we have sought to offer a rich snapshot of experiences of worklessness from those experiencing it day to day. We document what they said, what they thought, how they understood it and what they experienced.

2.1 Research methods

Ethnographic studies – a day in the life of

Ethnographic research with workless residents from Shard End and Washwood Heath formed the core of our approach. Ethnography was developed by anthropologists to understand people within their own social and cultural contexts. The primary method of the ethnographer is participant observation, where a researcher spends time with the participant asking questions along the way.

Shifting the research setting to one familiar to participants can often reveal the discrepancy between actions and words. People’s actions and thoughts are dependent on a vast range of factors, and what they say they do in one context is not necessarily what they actually do in another. The explanation participants offer during a day with a researcher is often much more revealing than what could be gleaned from a questionnaire or focus group.

The stories from these day-in-the-life-of studies are presented in Annex 1.

One-to-one interviews

To compliment the ethnographic studies and test the themes arising from it, we conducted 20 one-to-one interviews with unemployed residents from Shard End and Washwood Heath. The duration of the interview was 30-45 minutes and they were conducted in local support services where people came for advice and support in job seeking.

Participants

In total we spent time with 40 job seekers who were actively looking for work between May 2010 and August 2010. All of the participants lived in Washwood Heath or Shard End Super-Output Areas (SOAs). Participants were recruited via various local service providers and through snowball sampling; being referred from friends through word of mouth.

Participants ranged in age from 18-54 and there was an even gender balance. Participants came from a range of different ethnic backgrounds and had varying household compositions. However it is important to note that this was never intended to be a representative sample of workless residents. Rather it was to offer a new perspective on worklessness that could be considered in conjunction with what is known from quantitative analysis.

The names of the people we interviewed as part of this research have been changed.

2.2 Experts' input

We spoke to more than 30 local policy makers and professionals in Birmingham to test the stories and findings as they emerged and gather their opinions too. We have also had the benefit of expertise of practitioners and academics that attended our two experts' seminars, on Tuesday 12 May 2010 and Tuesday 12 October 2010. We are grateful to all for their kindness in sharing their experiences and insights.

2.3 Service design sessions

The research culminated in a workshop with local practitioners and policy makers to explore the findings and new approaches to meeting this most pressing of challenges. The format of this workshop will be informed by the Young Foundation's recent work on innovation in public services.¹ Our experience suggests that radically different ways of meeting unmet needs usually emerge when prompted by new data or an impending crisis (in this case we hope the 'day-in-the-life-of' stories and the imperative of the financial crisis will act as such) and the development of new proposals (hence our service design session to come up with as many new ideas as possible). We have used this technique to help public bodies design new solutions in fields such as education, youth crime, teenage pregnancy and public sector collaboration and the intention of this work is to stimulate new thinking about how resources can best be used in the future.

3 Understanding the context

3.1 Worklessness in Birmingham

The 2009/10 recession² was largely felt in the private sector, but while the economy has grown slightly in the past few months, this month's announcements about cuts in public sector spending, and the redundancies which will follow in the public sector, mean national employment rates are not predicted to return to pre-recession levels until 2015.³ There are now 1.47 million JSA claimants⁴ and more than eight million people are economically inactive⁵, the highest levels in 14 years.⁶

In Birmingham the recession magnified the city's long history of disproportionately high levels of worklessness; in 2008 the JSA claimants total rose by 12,000. The city's current unemployment rate (11.6 per cent⁷) and Job Seekers Allowance claimant rate (11.7 per cent⁸) are substantially higher than regional and national averages. A fifth of the current adult population hold no formal qualifications⁹, and the current rate of youth unemployment (24.4 per cent) is almost double the national average.

Over the last 20 years the city's economy has diversified from its former reliance on manufacturing. The factories building cars and other goods are being replaced with the service industries, retail, tourism and high skilled sectors. The recession has hit the service sector and the remaining manufacturing industry – the loss of 800 local jobs when LDV went into administration in 2009 was often a topic of conversation. Those with low skilled jobs in industries such as catering, retail, call centres and construction have also been badly affected. And with 31 per cent of Birmingham's workforce currently employed in the public sector, the city is also vulnerable to the likely second wave of the recession. Shard End and Washwood Heath both have high levels of public sector employment¹⁰, so the spending cuts are likely to be disproportionately felt in these two areas.

Birmingham City Council has invested significantly in reducing worklessness through the £118 million Working Neighbourhood Fund (WNF) which focuses support on residents from Super Output Areas (SOAs), which have unemployment rates exceeding 25 per cent, or which fall within the five per cent most deprived neighbourhoods nationally.

3.2 Current 'employability support' provision

Jobcentre Plus is the national agency that aims to provide services to support people into work. In addition to Jobcentre Plus, central and local government contract a range of private and third sector providers to contracted employment services to people looking for work. Throughout this report we have referred to these organisations as 'employability support providers'. They offer a range of support to job seekers from information, advice and guidance on employment and training needs to CV workshops; technical training to confidence building classes; mentoring to in work placements.

3.3 The future of worklessness support

The government has announced it will replace all existing welfare to work programmes with a single 'Work Programme'. June 2010 saw over £2 billion worth of projects cancelled, including the Future Jobs Fund, six month recruitment subsidies, Young Person's Guarantee, Job Seeker's Guarantee and Working Neighbourhoods Fund. The Work Programme is promised to offer 'targeted, personalised help for those who need it most, sooner rather than later'¹¹, and the Secretary of State has stated it will 'make work pay'.¹² Key changes include the shortening of the time before referral to the Work Programme, the inclusion (and re-assessment) of those on Incapacity Benefits, results based payment to service providers, an increased period of engagement, a focus upon individual needs rather than benefit status, the introduction of differential payments¹³, a direct relationship between the receipt of benefits and willingness to work, an increased focus on entrepreneurship and self-employment and greater freedom for service-providers.

Contracts for the Work Programme will be awarded in early 2011 with some selected contracts beginning in the spring. Jobcentre Plus will remain the primary facilitator of employment services and act as the 'gatekeeper' to the Work Programme.¹⁴ Work Programme contracts will be commissioned by the Department of Work and Pensions, which means these research findings have national, as well as local, significance.

PART II

Our research findings

4 Living in Birmingham

Where you live affects a whole range of factors associated with unemployment, including opportunities, aspirations and motivation.¹⁵ We looked at two very different areas of Birmingham that, on the face of it, struggle with similar issues. Shard End and Washwood Heath are both wards of East Birmingham's Hodge Hill constituency, which is characterised by high levels of economic deprivation and low levels of educational attainment.¹⁶ Both areas have high levels of social housing, employment prospects are limited, with poor transport links to nearby markets.¹⁷ However, while the two wards experience many of the same social and economic problems, Washwood Heath and Shard End are also very different from each other (see table 1 below). Shard End is a sprawling post-war estate on the edge of the city with few services and amenities. Washwood Heath is more central with denser housing and better access to services, shopping areas and the city centre.

Figure 1: Households, work and ethnicity in Shard End and Washwood Heath

	Washwood Heath	Shard End	Birmingham	England
Average household size	3.27 people	2.2 people	2.46 people	2.36 people
Lone parent households (Households with dependent children only)	21.9%	43.7%	34.4%	25.2%
People with limiting long-term illness	19%	24.7%	19.65%	17.92%
Worklessness rate	28.6%	29.3%	20.2%	13.2%
Unemployment (claimant) rate	28.3%	15.4%	11.6%	5.3% (UK rate)
Ethnic profiles:				
"Asian"	65%	1.7%	21%	5.7%
"Black"	4.8%	3.2%	6.7%	2.83%
"White"	26.8%	92.1%	66.7%	88.24%

4.1 Living in Shard End

Located in the east of Birmingham, Shard End has an older and more homogenous population than many other parts of Birmingham. At the time of the 2001 census, the population was 25,300, 92 per cent of whom were white. The area is largely residential and a significant minority of housing (42 per cent) is council owned. Outer East Birmingham, of which Shard End is a part, has twice the level of benefit dependency that the city average.¹⁸ Rates of worklessness in Shard End are 29.3 per cent, compared with the Birmingham average of 20.2 per cent.

Although Shard End is close to some of the major hubs of economic activity, including the National Exhibition Centre (NEC) and Birmingham International Airport, the area suffers from a “number of entrenched structural weaknesses, including unemployment and long-term worklessness (a 70 per cent increase in benefits claims by November 2009 and an 85 per cent increase in long-term unemployment)”.¹⁹ People we spent time with thought these problems were becoming worse due to the economic downturn, with many people mentioning friends or family who had been affected by lay-offs or factory closures.

Shard End is situated on the very edge of Birmingham and is, as one person said, “cut off from the rest of the city.” There are few amenities and services available locally. The shopping centres are small and run down, there is little voluntary sector activity and many of the public sector support services for local residents are located outside the area in neighbouring wards. The long distances and poor public transport services mean that residents often use shopping centres and services in Chemsley Wood and Solihull, rather than those in the city centre. There is a heavy reliance on private cars, with people who we spoke to prioritising the costs of keeping their vehicles on the road over other essentials. Those who did not have access to a car were at a considerable disadvantage.

The lack of employment support services in the local area is particularly problematic. Residents were unaware of local employment support services, aside from an outreach worker from Pertemps who visits the Hart Community Centre. Residents have to travel to Washwood Heath or Chelmsley Wood to visit the Jobcentre Plus or access other support. This was time consuming and costly.

“ ...it’s two bus rides away. I know they can help with the bus fare, but I just don’t have the time.

– Kim, single mother

While Shard End lacks formal support services, it was clear that for those who grew up in the area there were strong informal support networks of family and

friends. These social networks seemed to be as, if not more, important in finding out about jobs than the formal support agencies. Friends of friends would mention a job was going where they worked, or there was temporary work at the office where someone’s mother worked. However, these social networks were not open to everyone. People who had not grown up in the area or had recently moved there found it difficult to get to know people. They described the area as isolated, and isolating, and had little contact with neighbours or other members of the local community.

Both long-term residents and those who had arrived relatively recently believed that problems in the area were becoming worse. They thought that violence was increasing, drug use was more of an issue and much of this was due to the lack of jobs. As Patrick, a 54-year-old single male said, “When I moved here it was full of people my age, but now it is classed as a problem block, with people constantly moving in and out and drug problems.” Another participant explained, “This area has changed a lot. You used to be able to leave your door unlocked and as kids we could just go out to the park without being battered. There’s nothing around here. No jobs. Most people don’t have anything. Those that do have to go out of the area.” Single parents and older people seemed particularly vulnerable to these issues, and some chose self-imposed isolation – ‘keeping to themselves’ in order to avoid problems.

4.2 Living in Washwood Heath

Washwood Heath also has high levels of worklessness (28.6 per cent); however, it has a very different geography to Shard End. Washwood Heath is located in inner Birmingham. On average, it has larger households than Shard End and a younger population with almost half the population aged under 25. It is a majority ethnic minority area; 65 per cent of the population was classified as Asian at the 2001 census. The area has a large number of shops, restaurants, voluntary organisations and public bodies.

Washwood Heath can be a supportive place for those that fit into the community, both for long time residents and new arrivals. A number of participants had recently moved to the area from other parts of the world, but already had family or friends living in Washwood Heath. For Amal, an immigrant from Belgium, originally from Morocco, Washwood Heath is a great place: “the neighbourhood is easy for my kids, they have playmates and everything, including the school, is within walking distance or nearby.” The number of services that were nearby was often commented on. These included Jobcentre Plus, employment support agencies (Pertemps was most commonly talked about), and support hubs such as the Wardlow Centre or Nechells Baths.

While Washwood Heath is mostly spoken about as a “good place to live” by those in the majority Asian community, for others who are outside of that community, it can be an isolating and scary place to live. Some young women we spoke to

had been verbally and physically harassed by men. Many were reluctant to go out alone, or after dark. One said, “I don’t like the area at all, you can’t go to the shop without people bothering you. I wouldn’t go out after 7pm.” Adrian, another young participant who lived in Washwood Heath explained, “I’m not Asian so I’m an outsider. I don’t get brought into trouble. This area is ghetto though. I keep my head down. It’s peaceful though because of the Muslims. They’re not terrorists or anything, but you’ll get a few funny looks if you walk down the street with a can in your hand. I don’t really know anyone. It gets lonely. Nobody I know lives around here.”

4.3 Tensions and conflicts in both communities

During the time we spent with people in both areas we were concerned at the levels of tension that existed within the communities – often (but not exclusively) between different ethnic groups. Some people in the white community were frustrated and angry that they saw other groups “getting a better deal” in relation to benefits and housing. This was particularly acute in Shard End. Negative comments about the ethnic minorities, and particularly people of Asian descent, were common and centred on the lack of jobs and perceived unfairness in the allocation of resources. One young single mother in Shard End was concerned about how such factors would hurt the life chances of her son: “if my child is going to suffer school wise, and I can’t get a council house or benefits and can’t find work, then I am going to be really pissed off.”

Such tensions are likely to rise if unemployment continues to increase and other resources are cut due to the pressures on public spending.

5 Being workless in East Birmingham

5.1 Personalised support

For many of the people we spoke to, worklessness was a symptom of other more fundamental problems and needs in their lives such as alcohol or drug dependency, mental health needs, poor literacy, domestic violence and abuse. Despite the obvious barriers such problems create in getting and holding down a job, the participants were receiving the same generic advice and services as everyone else. Fully personalised support is expensive and not always possible to deliver. However, our research highlighted the need for more referrals to other specialist agencies and services and the need for customer pathways designed for people in particular circumstances.

Our research was not designed to develop full typologies of people looking for work (such an exercise would be best undertaken with the frontline staff who see the people everyday), however even our small sample showed certain groups of

people who had similar needs and required non-generic support. These included mothers returning to work, experienced people recently made redundant, young people living with parents, people with mental health needs, and those with criminal records. Many participants recognised this themselves and expressed frustration at the one-size-fits-all approach but continued to come back time and time again for the same advice, which was not helping them secure employment.

Below we have outlined the typologies that emerged through our research. While not fully formed we hope they will offer a starting point from which more thinking can be done on the role of customised services:

a Mothers returning to work

Many of the mothers who took part in this study had been out of work for a number of years. The economy had changed during their absence. They were now looking to re-enter the labour market and finding it difficult not only because the same opportunities were no longer available to them, but also what they sought from an employer had changed. They were now seeking an employer offering flexible hours that would chime with their responsibilities as primary care givers to their children. For example, Mia needs to take her daughter to the hospital once every two weeks to have the cast that straightens her spine changed. She was hoping to find an employer that would be able to work around this. Many mothers had made provisional childcare arrangements with family for when they found work, as formal childcare was seen as too expensive. The club that Anne-Marie was hoping would look after her children when she found a job was £130 per week per child for 8am-6pm during the school holidays. “At first I thought that was steep. And then the adviser said that was average.”

Stay at home mothers were also frustrated by the focus on CVs in the application processes because they did not think it best conveyed the skills they had to offer. Most believed they were capable and wanted a chance to prove themselves in the workplace. They were frustrated that their contact with Jobcentre Plus was limited to one appointment every six months.

“ You’re just expected to get on with it. I don’t think there’s enough help. Obviously you’re not going to get a job going to the Job Centre once every six months.

CLAUDIA'S STORY

 Claudia is 27 and lives in Shard End with her two school aged children. Her last job was in a care home. She enjoyed it but had to give it up to take her daughter to doctors' appointments and the hospital because she was unwell. Claudia's now looking for work

in a care home or perhaps in a warehouse or hotel; she "isn't afraid to try new things." She realises it will be difficult for her to find work as she left school at 15 without qualifications. However she wants to work to help her children have a better future so they don't "end up like me, trying to find a dead-end job."

b Young people

Many young people struggled to find employment because of a lack of experience and qualifications. They had fallen behind their peers who they were competing against in the employment market and had increasingly long periods of unemployment on their CVs that they could never make up. To be in this position aged 25 or under was particularly frustrating. For many the transition from full-time education to employment had not been well navigated. Time and again we heard stories of young people leaving school with poor grades, few GCSEs, and no clear idea about what type of career they wanted to pursue. Bullying at school was a frequent complaint. They would go on to begin college courses, but rarely complete them, instead going on to try and find work. If people are unable to cope within the relatively structured and supported education system, it is likely that they will struggle to cope within the far less supported and structured world of work.

For example, Peter, 23, left school with some GCSE's then "went to college a couple of times. Did a plaster course. Laid bricks for six months. Worked at UK Mail as well." He never completed his college courses, "I let it go. The hours were crazy. I was lazy, so I thought F that." Now he just wants a job. "All my mates work, I want a job as well."

If the cycle of worklessness is not broken for this generation there is a high chance that they will become long-term unemployed, costing the state directly through benefit payments and indirectly through associated support services. Long-term unemployed young people like Jeremy and Peter, often spoke of wanting the council to open some "easy doors" for them to help them navigate the pathway into sustainable employment. Some young people had been lucky in that they could be helped into employment through Intermediary Labour Markets organisations. For example, Sati is 25 and had been unemployed since she left school in 2004. She has a 20-hour a week ILM job as receptionist at a healthcare centre. She's still learning and her confidence ebbs and flows from one day to the next, but she wishes she could stay on in the job beyond the course of her ILM programme. The ILM experience has given her a clear idea of what she would like to do in the future

and she is looking to train to be a clinical support worker specialising in taking blood. Many of the participants we spoke to favoured training courses with work placements to build experience and providers spoke positively of the Future Jobs Fund in meeting this need.

JEREMY'S STORY

 Jeremy is 30 and lives by himself on a council estate in Washwood Heath. He's been unemployed for the last three years, but only looking for work for the past six months; "[I started] putting my heart into it towards the end of last year." Although he's begun looking he's still not sure what he wants to do. He thinks he'd like to work with children, but his mother talked him out of that

idea, which he now regrets. He likes computers but is worried about the amount of time it will take for him to train; "I'd love to look into it, but how many more years is that going to take?" The pressure to look for a job has come from his mates. "They've been pushing me to fix up and look sharp... It's not fair 'cause they got the good jobs." Then on reflection he says. "They went to college and everything and did it all right. I was too busy partying."

VEENA'S STORY

 Veena is 20 and lives with her parents and seven siblings in Washwood Heath – "They're all looking for jobs." Veena left school with two GCSEs, a C in Maths and a B in Religious Education. "It was alright but you couldn't learn much there." She went to college where she was "going to do childcare. But stopped that." Instead she

did English, Biology, Health and Social Care GCSEs for which she got Cs. Next she did an access to radiology course, which she stopped because of concern about how it may affect her health. She's now decided she would like to be a midwife because she's been told it is more about making sure the mother is okay than delivering the baby. She hopes to go back to college to take the childcare course.

c Criminal records

Several of the people we spoke with had criminal records which made employers reluctant to take them on. Sometimes it automatically disqualified them from proceeding further in the application process. Even if the particular criminal record was not a barrier to finding a job, people often assumed that it was.

ADRIAN'S STORY

Adrian is 25 and we spend some time in Jobcentre Plus searching for jobs. Eventually, Adrian finds several jobs that he thinks he might be eligible for. He prints off the details and we walk to another employment support office where he can apply online. As he goes through the web-based forms, Adrian is forced to declare his criminal record – damage to property and resisting arrest when he was younger. As

soon as he enters these details, the screen tells him that there are no vacancies. This happens with all three jobs he tries to apply for. Adrian shakes his head, “A stupid mistake when I was younger. That’s all it was, a stupid mistake. And now I’m screwed for life because of it.” Nobody has given Adrian any support in thinking through how to apply for jobs with his criminal convictions and he is becoming increasingly demotivated as he deals with rejection after rejection.

Other participants were unsure about how their criminal records affected their eligibility for the jobs they were applying for and there is obviously a need for tailored advice. Steve believed that his term in prison was unlikely to cause him difficulty in finding a job in commercial cleaning. Malik 28, had been arrested a few times, although not charged. He had received job offers, however they had been withdrawn when his CRB check results came through. He does not disclose his arrests at interview and believes that it's his credit history rather than his arrests that make it difficult for him to get a job.

Although the probation service aims to provide its clients with career guidance, the people we spoke to who were eligible mistrusted the service in general and did not want to engage with their staff anymore than absolutely necessary. There are voluntary sector agencies working in Birmingham which offer support to ex-offenders, including NACRO (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders) and the Apex Trust, however, nobody we spoke to had been referred to or advised to contact them.

d Literacy and language

Poor experiences at school resulted in low levels of literacy among some people we spent time with. This was a sensitive subject for people to discuss, but it became apparent when people were completing forms or looking for jobs that reading and writing were hampering their ability to search for, let alone find a job. Poor literacy also made using the online resources and applications more difficult, especially for those without a computer at home.

The ability to speak English is considered a key requirement for finding a ‘good job’. Many of the immigrants we spoke with noted learning English as their most important priority. The inability to speak, read or write English meant many had to rely upon friends and family to translate for them, which held them back when seeking work. Additionally, poor English skills often led to employment insecurity and vulnerability. Imran, an Afghani immigrant who has lived in Birmingham for eight years, described working at a pizza restaurant in Solihull where he was paid below minimum wage and had no formal contract. According to Imran, when he asked for a wage slip his boss told him he would have to pay £10 to get it.

Most of the immigrants or refugees we spoke with were enrolled in ESOL classes, however many wanted more intensive classes on a continual basis, rather than classes that run only throughout the academic year. Making slow progress was frustrating and they wanted to bring their language skills up to speed so they could secure a job.

e Mental health

Two of the people we spent time with had overt mental health needs, but were not receiving sufficient medical assistance. In the case of Phillip, below, the employment support providers were the only services he was accessing. Phillip had had no success in getting a job and there was nothing to suggest that this would change with the support he was receiving. More tailored advice or a referral to other support services would be a far more appropriate course of action rather than endlessly altering his CV.

PHILLIP'S STORY

Phillip is 31 and lives alone. He had experienced a breakdown in the relationship with his family that he is reluctant to talk about. He no longer has any contact with his family and has no other support, spending weeks without talking to people. The breakdown in the relationship with his family coincided with Phillip becoming homeless and a deterioration in his mental health. At one homeless support centre Phillip was

prescribed some medication, but he complained that it made him feel drowsy and “out of it”. Since then he has avoided health services as much as possible. He has trouble sleeping and has great difficulty concentrating on a single train of thought. His conversations are hard to follow and he rapidly jumps from subject to subject, many of which appear unconnected. He visits Jobcentre Plus and employment support providers almost everyday, yet the only advice he is receiving is on improving his CV.

5.2 Managing money

Going from working to benefits was a bit of a rain check. I started with a couple of hundred pounds in savings. That went in no time. I have trouble keeping up. We don't have any luxuries. – Adrian 25

While we spoke to a diverse range of people, the struggle to get by on benefits was one of the common factors that united them. Being without work meant that making ends meet was a struggle and a constant source of stress for many of those who took part in this study. Few participants had savings to fall back on and all relied on benefits to get by. They often ran out of money within days of receiving their benefit payments. Whilst younger people were cushioned by parents who paid bills, those responsible for family finances often borrowed money or went into debt. For others it meant sitting tight and going without.

Participants living alone often had tight budgets or went without, in a bid to avoid debt. Unlike young people living with their parents they had nothing to fall back on when the money ran out. Phillip, aged 31, would go to drop in centres for homeless people when he had run out of money. Others would manage on their limited incomes through careful budgeting. For example, Stacey paid her bills first, then food, then new clothes and shoes for her two-year-old son. After this she would be out of money. Anne-Marie would budget down to the last penny, factoring children's clothes and new shoes into each week's budget. This year she had been saving a little every week so she would have enough to take the children to the zoo during the school holidays. A special treat as her daughter wants to be a zookeeper. "I normally try and save a bit of money so we can have one special day. We're going to the zoo next week... You have to plan everything so far in advance [financially]. We haven't had a holiday since Jane was three. They keep looking at the photos [of their holiday in Pontins] and saying *when mummy gets a job we'll go there again.*"

KIM'S STORY

Kim claims to be bad at maths, however, in taking a trolley around Iceland she shows herself to be financially astute. "I've got to add it up as I go around. I don't want to end up at the till with no

money to buy it. It's happened to me before. It's so embarrassing." With two kids running riot around her she makes sure her groceries don't add up to more than £50. As we leave Kim sighs, "Constantly bargain shopping all the time is exhausting."

People were often embarrassed to ask for help or query what their entitlements were. For example, Anne-Marie was unaware she could ask for her bus fare to be reimbursed when she went to use local employability services. She had been

limiting her visits to once a week because she could not afford to pay the family bus fare of £7.50 more frequently. "I get embarrassed asking for help with things like that... if I had to walk around on barefoot I would. That's better than asking."

The prospect of work did not necessarily ease financial concerns. People were anxious about the transition from benefits to employment – the gap between benefits stopping and the first pay cheque coming in. Part-time work often didn't add up. Leroy turned down an 18-hour a week job because it meant he would lose his JSA, housing benefit and Council Tax, but the £300-£400 he would earn a month wouldn't be enough to cover rent, bills and food. Rent alone would take £286 per month from a part-time pay cheque.

Overall peoples' wage expectations were modest. Most were looking to earn the minimum wage of £5.80 per hour, or a couple of pounds over. This was in line with what the jobs they were applying for were offering. Most also wanted permanent contracts and full time hours – we discuss this aspiration, and its fit with the jobs market, more fully in section six.

5.3 Travel

Many of the people we spent time with were highly mobile. They were not restricted to their local areas, but would move around the city and surrounding area to see friends and visit family, to shop, to go to the doctors or hospital and to access employment support services or to go to job interviews. For some, particularly those in Shard End, maintaining a private car was a priority. These costs were often prioritised over other essentials. As one man said, "Without a car I couldn't get to where the jobs are. Even if I was offered a job, I'd need the car to get there."

For those without access to cars, public transport was the only other option and this was often talked about as being prohibitively expensive. Many people walked rather than pay for the bus. The day we spent with Adrian, he complained that he was always walking. His mother lives four miles away, his son four miles in the other direction and he rarely has money for bus fare. He could poke his finger through the bottom of his shoe where the sole has been worn away trudging around the city. Others, particularly the younger participants, would avoid paying bus fares by using the back door or by using old bus passes.

Transport was a key consideration for many when considering the jobs they would apply for. People were willing to travel, but for many there was a 'two bus' cut off point. If a journey required more than two buses, then people would be far less likely to apply for it. The city's public transport routes make getting to warehouses and other out-of-town jobs much harder for those without cars. Similarly, public transport would not always allow people to work the early or late shifts required in roles in the fast food sector or in care homes.

5.4 Confidence

“I’m told to hang in there, but it’s been a year!” – Savita, 42

Work provides much more than an income. Working helps shape our sense of self-worth and identity. It impacts on the decisions we make in our everyday lives and provides them with structure and routine. The experience of looking for work can be lonely and laborious, not to mention demoralising and stressful, as people try to cope on limited incomes. It can also impact on psychological wellbeing and contribute to social isolation. One of the most difficult aspects is that there is no way of telling when it will yield results. Power rests with the potential employer, not the jobseeker. All that jobseekers can do is search for vacancies, call potential employers, send off application forms, do their best at interviews and wait to hear back in the hope they receive a call asking them when they can start. As one interviewee said, “I go to bed every night thinking perhaps tomorrow I’ll get that letter or that phone call. Even just an interview.”

People’s confidence ebbed the longer they had been out of work. Receiving rejection letters, or no responses at all, was demoralising and this feeling was compounded as the weeks without work turned into months, and then into years. This impacted on the approach people took to job seeking. For example, Peter believed he had to present a certain image at job interviews and if he could not muster it that day he would not go. “Interviews are alright, but you gotta be bouncy. I gotta work on my people skills...[It] depends how confident I feel on the day. If I don’t feel confident, I don’t go to the interview.”

CJ was very anxious about an interview he had the previous week that he still had not heard back from. He had been slow to complete written questions in the interview and was worried that it cost him the job. He struggles with reading and writing, so likes to complete applications at home where he can take his time and make sure he completes them correctly. Now he could not stop turning the events of the interview over in his mind. He thought that he was constantly being judged and not meeting the mark.

Those who had been seeking work for shorter periods of time were generally more confident. “If I get an interview, eight out of 10 times, I will get the job,” said Stacey, 25, who had not yet applied for a job. Kieran, 29, had just been on a weekend away with his family to Amsterdam, was redecorating his flat, and had put a deposit down for a holiday to the Canary Islands next year confident he’d have the income to pay for it. However, at the same time he was spending more time training at the gym “It keeps me sane. I’m at the gym most days. It clears my head. You’ve got to keep occupied and doing something positive.”

5.5 Depression and mental health

“Honestly the mental stuff. It gets you down. You think about suicide. The only thing stopping me is that I know God wouldn’t forgive me.” – Ben, 50.

For several people the experience of unemployment led to poor psychological wellbeing, with participants reporting feelings of depression amongst themselves and friends in similar circumstances. CJ spoke of friends who were depressed about being out of work. He did not want to “knock about” with them because he was afraid if he started commiserating with them he’d begin to feel the same way.

BEN’S STORY

Ben is 50 and lives in Shard End. He used to run his own business, however, it collapsed during the recession. “In November, December, January and February I lost £42k because companies had gone bust and into receivership. One company had gone bust three times. You can’t live off that work.” When the company was successful Ben employed up to six people. Ben now lives between friends houses including one who

sells the Big Issue, “People who I stay with are very good and give me a bit of food. Now I have to leave during the day to be out so I am not on top of them.” What Ben was struggling with most was the psychological aspect of worklessness “It’s no good for self-esteem. It demoralises you.” One day he had to beg for the money for the bus fare into town, so he could get a photo taken for a travel card, “On that day I felt so low. I actually begged off the street for £1.50. I had no other money.”

Many people also struggled with the absence of routine and purpose in their lives. Amir was filling the gap by frantically circumventing the city looking for work; going to the library to use the computer, then Jobcentre Plus, then Pertemps. When he paused to reflect on his efforts he told us “I don’t seem to be getting anywhere.” He had moments when he no longer felt in control of his life. “If you haven’t got a job, you haven’t really got a routine. When you have a job you have to eat on time, sleep on time. When you haven’t got a job you have nothing to look forward to the next day.”

6 People’s understandings of work

There was a fundamental mismatch in people’s experience of the labour market and their expectations of what they considered to be a good job. The labour market was characterised by fluidity – people had worked in short-term jobs with low pay and high levels of insecurity. What they wanted was stability – long

term stable jobs which offered a future career trajectory or at the very least some chance of progression.

6.1 Labour market fluidity

The previous experience of the majority of those who took part in this study was in low-skilled jobs in sectors such as retail, hospitality, construction, manufacturing, or the care industry. These jobs were characterised by low pay and insecurity, with many people being employed on a casual basis. This made them vulnerable if the hours offered to them dwindled; they may find themselves redundant or without enough in their paycheque to cover the bills. For example, Paul, 19 from Shard End, was made redundant from his packing job in a warehouse after three months of employment when they did not need him any longer.

Many people had been in and out of employment over long periods of time. Kieran had a succession of construction jobs; CJ had a succession of care jobs; while Amir had multiple short periods of unemployment over the past eight years. Having previous short spells of unemployment made some participants feel confident they would be able to find work again soon, however other participants were more cautious. CJ was very anxious about finding work quickly and not slipping into long-term unemployment, “You get used to being on the dole, you find it hard to get off.” He knew from experience that the longer you were out of work the more difficult it was to get back into work.

Exits from employment were sometimes voluntary as people lost interest in jobs they considered boring or aspects of the role began to grate. Jeremy who is 30 and lives in Washwood Heath can rattle off the jobs he’s had; four years working in various factories, some gardening work, plaster work and bricklaying. He’s never been made redundant. “If I don’t feel happy, if I feel it’s not my type of thing, I go. If I don’t think it suits my character I go... I don’t think I’ve ever been sacked. I’ve just walked out.” Kristy left her cafe job because she could not stand the smells when she became pregnant. Adrian left his job at McDonalds after three weeks because “I couldn’t deal with the happy face language we had to use. ‘Mac’s up’ we’d have to shout. No way.” Fatima left her job as a care assistant because she did not like the functions of the role.

Jobs could also be exploitative. We heard stories of discrimination, employment laws seemingly being flouted, underpay and poor working conditions. Employees often felt powerless to change the situation. But we were also struck by the lack of skills many of the jobseekers had to deal with much smaller instances of workplace tension – poor feedback from a colleague, a penalty for lateness or the expectation of completing menial duties had led many to walk out, abandoning a previous workplace without yet securing another role. This pattern of behaviour had worked for some before the recession – moving from one role to another – but as work dried up they found themselves unable to enter the jobs market.

Despite the apparent ease with which some people walked out of employment, involuntary redundancies could come as a shock. Keiran lost his electrical apprenticeship without warning. “In July they made me redundant. Due to the recession, they said. I was gutted. Gutted... I didn’t get any advice when I was laid off. Nothing. A week’s wages or whatever and that’s it. Two years of working there and nothing.”

6.2 “Good jobs”

Overall, a good job was considered to be a stable job. People’s bad experiences of work shaped their thoughts on what was a good job. Those who had experienced difficult working relationships with colleagues or managers often stressed the importance of having amiable colleagues and a congenial working environment. This was frequently cited before considerations of pay.

Hours were also important. People wanted full-time jobs and the assurance of a consistent weekly paycheque so they would have enough to pay rent and bills. Patrick wanted a job for 35-40 hours a week with a reliable income so he “knows where the money is coming from.” He was no longer willing to take poor paying insecure jobs, for example driving jobs that had a 2am start and paid minimum wage “[Job agencies] shouldn’t expect other people to do jobs they themselves wouldn’t do.”

Many mothers returning to the workplace wanted flexibility – hours that would fit with the school day or childcare provision. Kim who was looking for work in the care sector found the prospect of organising childcare around shift work difficult. “Nights are impossible with children. How can you organise childcare?” Even the morning shifts aren’t easy. “How many places can you take a toddler at five in the morning if you need to be at work at six o’clock? Nowhere will take them. It’d need to be part-time work because of the kids.”

Progression was also important, especially for those who had limited experience, but wanted to prove they were capable. Anne-Marie, a 34 year-old single mother, was looking for her first job after 11 years and was willing to enter on the bottom rung. “As long as I’m getting minimum wage and I’m not worse off, then I’m not bothered, I just want my foot in the door.” In her last factory job she had gone from being on the line to running it and she was hoping to repeat her experience.

Learning on the job also improved job satisfaction. Amal spoke highly of his ten years on the assembly line at Volkswagen in Belgium because he had enjoyed it and learnt a lot of skills that could help him with future roles.

7 Supporting people into work

7.1 Jobcentre Plus

Visits to Jobcentre Plus featured in most of the days we spent with people. It was central to everyone's experience of being unemployed, both in terms of accessing benefits and looking for work. However, people's experiences of Jobcentre Plus were almost entirely negative. The vast majority of people we spoke to found Jobcentre Plus to be a threatening and unpleasant environment and were confused about its role.

We could see how people would physically change as they approached Job Centre Plus in Washwood Heath, which serves both residents of Washwood Heath and Shard End. Adrian, usually a confident and cocky 25-year-old, shrank into himself as we went in; he became anxious, avoided eye contact with everyone and kept his head down. It was clear that he could not wait to leave. Similarly, Ebony a young Black British woman felt decidedly uncomfortable and unwelcome at Jobcentre Plus, with the receptionist telling her she "looks too nice to be there." One interviewee, Kieran, avoided the Washwood Heath Job Centre altogether. He used the one in Chemsley Wood instead because he felt it to be less intimidating, although not by much: "People sitting around outside drinking Super Tennants all day. It's no wonder [my partner] doesn't like coming here. She get hassled, people calling her over and that. You get some dodgy characters around there. They're no place to bring kids."

MIA'S STORY

Mia queues to use one of the phones at Jobcentre Plus. While she's waiting tempers flare. A man slams down the phone,

"F****g c**t", and storms off. The security guard's ears perk up while everyone else continues on scouring job adverts, waiting for appointments and calling potential employees.

It was not only the physical environment that was poor. A common complaint of Jobcentre Plus was that people were "not being listened to," or were "not being treated like a person." People expressed frustration at the lack of personalised attention they received, no matter what the circumstance. As one young woman said, "you could go in with a crisis and they would ask you to go over there and stand in line." A number of people noted how busy Job Centre advisors were, and how they only had time for them "when you sign-on or for an appointment." Others, who weren't receiving the JSA, weren't given support at all: "I've been to the Job Centre countless times and they always tell me they can't help me because I'm not on JSA, which I think is unfair, because I want to work. It should be called the Job Centre for JSA only."

There was confusion about the role Jobcentre Plus is supposed to play. Does it provide support for people to get into work? Does it just advertise jobs? Does it administer benefit payments? At one Jobcentre Plus, a man entered and asked about getting help with his CV, to which the Jobcentre Plus employee responded, "hmmm, I don't know, I don't think we do that, let me ask." The most common experience people encounter is of 'signing on' and being told when to come back again.

Most people's attitudes towards JobCentre Plus were dependant on the quality of advice they were given by their advisors. We also heard some horror of rudeness, lack of knowledge, little signposting to other organisations etc, but largely participants complained that they were simply not given enough time and attention. Advisors carry large caseloads and have relatively limited options for services they can offer jobseekers. A researcher spent three hours in the Chemsley Wood Job Centre one afternoon, and noted that an average appointment was less than one minute long. A number of interviewees talked about the 'target culture', sensing that advisors were only interested in filling numbers, not actually helping people. As one man said, "The Job Centres aren't really interested in the people. They are only trying to get people warehouse work. They don't understand people like me. I don't want any old job."

Participants were also frustrated at the range and quality of jobs which the Jobcentre Plus were able to advise on - low-skilled, poorly paid or highly specialised jobs: "You don't get many ideas about what to do. The Job Centre, they give you limited options. It's all care work or factory work, there are no interesting jobs." The common perception amongst the people we talked to was that Jobcentre Plus rarely offered people jobs that would make them better off and wasn't a good place to look for "a proper job". One young man told a story about a friend's sister who got a job through Jobcentre Plus only to be £15 a week better off. "They can find you work when you're working for a pittance, not a proper job. It's a joke."

PATRICK'S STORY

Patrick, a single 54 year old hasn't worked for four years. The jobs on offer from Jobcentre Plus would pay him less than he used to make and he thinks he, "shouldn't have to go backwards." The bottom-line, according to

Patrick, is that he can't afford to come off of benefits. Patrick currently gets reduced council tax, free rent and doesn't have to pay utilities. He is looking for something that is £7 an hour and up, although Jobcentre Plus has told him he is "never going to get a job like that."

The Jobcentre Plus infrastructure has been designed to provide online and telephone services. However, these were not always suitable for people. Phillip, who suffers from mental health problems, feels particularly distressed and frustrated by his experience. While he regularly goes to Jobcentre Plus, he complains that the staff “are always telling me to use the internet. I can’t do it. I need someone to find me a job. But there isn’t anyone.” People wanted personal and face-to-face support. Sabia, an Afghani immigrant was frustrated by the lack of support she received. She was told to look for jobs herself despite the fact that she had very limited English. At Rashida’s back to work interview she asked about training but was told to “ask at her next appointment.” Rashida and others have also been told they will be eligible for more support and training after six months of being on the JSA, although they are unclear what that support will entail.

The Jobcentre Plus branches we spent the most time at seemed fit for only one purpose: signing people on and giving them their next appointment. Because of the large workload and resource constraints there is clearly a need for Job Centres to be able to better refer individuals to places that can help them in a more timely and efficient manner.

7.2 Other support organisations

In addition to Jobcentre Plus there are providers of contracted employment services in Birmingham that offer a range of support to people looking for work. Visiting these services is often voluntary, although jobseekers can be referred if they breach the terms of their JSA. All of the people we spoke to had or were using such providers. The list of organisations that our interviewees mentioned included:

- Ingeus – provides personalised advice to jobseekers and training on personal development
- Jericho Foundation – a social enterprise that offers jobseekers paid work experience and help seeking work
- Pertemps – provides personalised CV, job seeking, and training advice
- Phoenix Training – offers training including forklift driving, security, IT etc
- 4-Star – provides intensive support for long-term unemployed
- JET shop – one-stop-shop for information, advice and guidance on employment and training needs.

The number of these providers confused people and many were not quite sure how they differed. We found that the same individuals were accessing support from multiple providers. As one of our interviewees commented,

“ They all say they can do this, do that, but at the end of the day they are all the same. They haven’t found me a job.” Another felt pressured to sign up with multiple providers, “There are so many of them. They all park coaches and vans up [outside Jobcentre Plus] and try and recruit anyone.

Despite the confusion, experiences of the other support services are generally much more positive than Jobcentre Plus. Pertemps, a private recruitment and employment support agency, was particularly popular. The majority of our interviewees who visited Pertemps described it as friendly, accessible, helpful and respectful. The atmosphere and attitude of the advisors was noted as one of the most important benefits, particularly for those who had had negative experiences at Jobcentre Plus. It was clear that people were more comfortable and relaxed in the Pertemps office and as a result stayed longer looking and applying for jobs. As one young woman said about one member of staff, “she is down to earth... and doesn’t look down on people.” Others mentioned the flexibility of the staff, mentioning an outreach worker who travels to people’s homes and phones people up to check on how they are doing. Pertemps served as a base for many of those committed to looking for work. Malik, a 28-year-old male, likes Pertemps for just this purpose and said, “Pertemps is the best for me, I can use the phone and the Internet. It’s mostly about the facilities. There aren’t enough facilities and advisors for people”.

It was not just the atmosphere that people valued at Pertemps, but also that they offered practical support for looking for jobs. People particularly valued access to the internet on the computers, the ability to use phones for applying for jobs, that Pertemps would provide bus passes to help with travel to job interviews and that smart clothes were available for use at job interviews. However, not everyone we spoke to was aware that such support was available and complained that the expense of buying phone credits, postage and bus fares hampered their search for work.

People were positive about many of the support services in terms of the staff, the atmosphere and the practical measures that they offered to clients. However, across all the providers there appeared to be strong focus on preparing and improving CVs. One of the consequences of the focus on CVs was that people began to feel that their CV, and particularly how it was formatted, was the reason

they were not getting jobs. One person believed that he wasn't shortlisted for a job because his name was not in bold type on his CV.

TREVOR'S STORY

Trevor, an 18-year-old male with no educational qualifications and issues with numeracy and literacy, has had a negative experience at Pertemps. His advisor rewrote his CV for him without his help and he now feels he can't use it to look for work: "look at this, I don't even know what some of

these words mean, and they lied about my qualifications." He is clearly frustrated by this process: "it's like none of them can be bothered to spend time with me, they just don't listen, and don't seem to care." Additionally, the CV workshops he has attended have up to 12 attendees, and don't give him the individual attention he needs.

There was also a deep suspicion, particularly among people who had been looking for work for some time, that many of the jobs on offer at the various support agencies 'weren't real'. Often they would call about jobs only to be told there were none available, but the ad would still be up in Jobcentre Plus the following week. A number of individuals spoke of attending group job interviews, after which nobody got the job, but the posting remained on the board.

Although many of the support services claim to offer personalised support. We found that support and guidance for those who need the 'mainstream' support and guidance providers seemed unable to deal with those who needed more assistance, such as those lacking key literacy or numeracy skills, or those suffering from mental or physical illnesses. For individuals requiring extra support, the lack of help and attention can be isolating, confusing and disheartening.

TREVOR'S STORY

Trevor, an 18 year old male from Shard End lacking key literacy and numeracy skills, eventually found help at Learn Direct in Birmingham Central Library, but only after having persistently pursued an appointment. The advisor he met with was clearly highly knowledgeable about what Trevor might qualify for in terms of support, and helped him think about the things he needed to do to reach his goals, in particular, returning to education. Despite

the fact that Trevor's Job Centre advisor had told him the same thing only hours before, the advisor at Learn Direct approached returning to education in a different way, telling Trevor about courses he could take part-time, which were more 'hands-on' and less classroom and essay based, two main fears of Trevor's related to returning to education. Trevor was visibly relieved at the end of the session at the library saying, "I feel like I have more of a handle over what is going on and what I need to do to get a job."

A number of employment support services in Birmingham focus explicitly on training, and for the majority of the people interviewed for this report, such a specific focus, with a tangible outcome at the end, was very welcome. At Phoenix Training Centre, people went on courses for skills such as forklift driving and security guard training. These were generally well received, as one person said, "Phoenix is how training should be. Turn up on time. No messing about." But despite positive experiences, such training courses did not directly improve people's prospects of finding a job. Many of the jobs for which people were trained at Phoenix required experience as well as qualifications. This is something Phoenix does not offer. Many people leave Phoenix with renewed hope of finding work, but are ultimately disappointed: "The system's [makes it] too hard to find a job. You can have the qualifications, but you still can't get it."

This was a general concern about training. Getting qualifications or going on courses raised expectations that were not realised. People would complete their training, but found that this did not lead to any jobs. Unsurprisingly, they quickly became cynical and disillusioned. The lack of value in much of the training provided was even noted by those offering it. One service provider joked, "Having a certificate in Word Level 3 is a bit like saying I'm long-term unemployed."

Training experiences linked to work experience were, by far, the most positive. The Jericho Foundation runs an intermediate labour market (ILM) programme that puts individuals into part-time work placements for three to six months and pays them minimum wage. The individuals we spoke to taking part in this programme found the experience useful for a number of reasons. The main benefit was access to experience in 'real jobs' where they learned about the

world of work, as well as gaining specific skills. This experience served to build confidence about their prospects, as well as 'figure out' what they were good at and might want to do in the future. Perhaps most importantly, the ILM helps to mitigate many of the issues commonly associated with going 'back to work', including the benefits trap, and works to find placements for people that match their needs. For one young woman, Sati, medical conditions frequently kept her out of work, but through Jericho, she was given a part-time position at a job close to her house, meaning she was able to walk to work, an important requirement for any job she hopes to have.

AMAL'S STORY

For one Moroccan immigrant, Amal, the ILM programme has helped give him a positive start in his new life. Through Jericho, Amal has a part-time week job paying minimum wage at a café, where he helps to cook, clean and does delivery work. As Amal said, "I feel really lucky to have this work placement". The

job gives him much more than income; he is meeting people, making connections, and feels welcomed to his new home. The people he has met through his job have been, "warm and friendly". Amal's job placement is helping him navigate his new home, as well as giving him a link to the networks and connections needed for future employment.

8 Thinking beyond the organisation – social support into work

Whatever support is available to people through the formal structures of Jobcentre Plus or other employment organisations, the reality is that people's social networks and relationships are the biggest determinants of whether they are or are not able to get jobs. People hear about jobs and opportunities through their friends, families and other connections. It is usually something in their personal and social lives that motivates people to keep looking for work and to aspire to succeed, or conversely limits their aspirations and ambitions. Yet despite the obvious importance of these social networks and relationships, these remain largely absent in the approach taken or the advice offered by formal service providers.

8.1 Finding jobs on the grapevine

Few of the people we spent time had been out of work for many years, rather they had been in and out of jobs. When we asked how people had found these positions, a common response was that they had heard about them through a family member or a friend who worked there. Adrian for example, had worked as

a roofer for several months, a job which he got through his Mum's partner. His Mum had got him an office job that lasted until the firm went bust. His Mum had also helped arrange a string of temporary warehouse jobs and his ex-girlfriend had helped him get a data entry job, which he kept until the company closed down. Not once had Adrian managed to get a job through the formal employment services, all of them had been organised through his informal social networks.

8.2 Aspirations and role models

Social relationships often structured how people thought about work, including their perceptions around their prospects, what they needed to do to achieve their goals, and what the 'world of work' entailed.

Generational, rather than intergenerational, worklessness served as an important influence on what many young people expected, wanted and experienced in relation to work. Our research uncovered a culture of worklessness among the younger generation, generation x or y, who often had friends and brothers and sisters out of work, rather than parents. Many of these younger individuals had groups of friends who were also unemployed or in low-paid, temporary work and there was often a reoccurring cycling between various 'unstable' jobs. This generational influence, served to 'normalise' patterns of worklessness, or cycles between work and school. Additionally, these young people, with the exception of single mothers, also expressed a desire to do work that matched "what they were interested in." Perhaps a sign of youthful optimism, many of these young people had highflying dreams and aspirations, such as being an actress, singer or flight attendant, that were at odds with the 'right now' jobs they were applying for in order to subsidise their lifestyles. A number of these young people were also still living with parents, and thus hadn't had to deal with harsh financial realities.

EBONY'S STORY

Ebony, 21, spends most of her time hanging-out in central Birmingham, around the bullring with her friends. Many of Ebony's friends are in a similar position to her; they may have had casual or part-time work, but nothing

'sustainable', which is what Ebony wants. She describes her friends as a "band of misfits" who are into music, fashion, acting and skate boarding. One friend recently dropped out of a 5 days a week college course saying, "it was too much." Another is unemployed and calls herself 'a bum'.

The experiences of friends and family, and in particular the immediate family, including parents and brothers and sisters, often served as important lessons to people about what the world of work looked like, what to expect, and how best to get there. Experiences of 'being taken advantage of' in the workplace by parents

or siblings often served as a warning “not to take any shit” from employers. Perhaps because of this expectation of being taken advantage of, individuals often seemed unsure of how to deal with issues or concerns that arose in the workplace, and regularly quit, rather than addressing them. A common aspiration of people was to ‘have their own business or be their own boss’, which frequently related to the desire to have more control over one’s working life and not be dictated to by unfair employers. Additionally, experiences from friends and family members of going on endless training schemes and building skills without gaining a job served as a reinforcement for many individuals, and particularly young people, that skills don’t equal work, and that getting a job sometimes isn’t ‘worth it’ in the end. According to one young woman speaking about her mother,

“ she has a lot of skills but no work, and the work she has had isn’t worth it in terms of benefits. It just never worked out for her.

Positive role models in work were hugely important for showing others that jobs can be fulfilling and provide a decent wage, that hard work is worth it, and also, that even those who have been knocked back, can make it. One young man, Trevor, was thinking about going into care work for the NHS because that is what his mother has done her whole life, she likes it, and it has given her a stable income. She told him, “It is the best organisation I’ve ever worked for.” Another young woman told the story of her brother who was kicked out of school at 15, only to get an apprenticeship. He is now earning great money and had just taken his international mechanics license exam. Within the Asian community, where women frequently don’t work, positive examples of women breaking that taboo and making it served as important lessons about what is possible. One woman, Fatima, claimed that 60 per cent of the women she knew were housewives, or worked in shops or beauty stores. Her sisters, however, were doing things differently; one was in law school and another working at an insurance agency. These examples helped Fatima to imagine a different life for herself, and she is now planning on going to school to be a midwife.

8.3 Staying motivated

Relationships have a significant impact on individuals’ ability, motivation and aspirations in relation to work. Our research found that social relationships often act as a ‘tipping point’, motivating people to find work because of a change in a relationship, or demotivating them from particular jobs, education or training based on the experiences of those around them. Many of the motivations people expressed in relation to work linked directly to their social context and relationships, including the desire to set a good example for one’s children, the ability to ‘have something to do and make something of one’s self’, which was tied

to social recognition, and the desire to be a part of ‘normal social life’ and be able to afford ‘things’ like holidays and shopping. “It’s not for the money. The money would be a bonus. What I want is to recognise myself. It’s always ‘this is such and such’s daughter, mother, wife...’ but I want to be known as me.”

Domestic relationships and children often served as significant influences on women and their ability and desire to work. The largest and most significant effect of domestic relationships upon women was their role as single mothers after their relationships had fallen apart. Pregnancy regularly interrupted or shut-down aspirations and career plans, or compounded existing problems, like redundancy and relationship problems. Stacey, a 25 year old mother of one, found out she was pregnant with her son, Cole, three weeks after quitting a job, and the pregnancy compounded problems with her partner and she was forced to move out of her house. Another young woman, Kristy, had recently re-entered the labour market after the birth of her first son, but found out four months in that she was pregnant again, her employer “didn’t have insurance to cover her or the patients if something happened,” so, once again, she had to leave.

While pregnancy often served to disrupt work and career plans, having children was often seen as a motivating factor for women in terms of finding work and re-entering the labour market. In most cases, once women had children, and stayed home being mother for a number of years, in one case 11 years, they were more motivated to go out and find ‘serious work’ in order to give their children the opportunities they never had and set a good example in terms of work ethic: “I want them to see me work, so they can see me better myself. So I can rent a house and they can go upstairs to bed with the window open. I know it may not sound like a lot to some people.” For a number of these women, getting back into work was directly linked to ensuring their children knew the value and importance of work, and what it took to achieve one’s aims and objectives, despite the worklessness around them.

KRISTY'S STORY

Kristy, 23, lives in a two-bed council flat in Washwood Heath with her two sons, Chris, 5, and Joel, 16 months. Kristy's partner, Mike, 21, comes and goes as he pleases. While he doesn't hold down formal work, Mike makes money, sometimes a lot, probably through illegal means, although Kristy doesn't want to know, so she

doesn't ask. Kristy wants to have a job so she can set a good example for her children so that they "understand the importance of work." As it is, she is afraid "they will see Mike, coming in with designer sneakers, and new clothes, after not having worked a day, and think that's normal." Kristy is determined to be that role model of hard work for her boys.

While children were both a barrier and a catalyst in terms of motivation and aspirations, negative relationships with ex-partners served as a significant and negative factor in many women's story about employment. A number of women had had abusive relationships with partners who they had to "try and escape", either physically or emotionally. A few were in the process of rebuilding their lives. The distraction and trauma of abuse, betrayal and absence often made work extremely difficult for women who were trying to maintain normalcy for the sake of the children, as well as stay afloat themselves. Fatima, a Pakistani-British mother of three, lives in her estranged husband's house in Washwood Heath. Fatima found out her husband was cheating on her while pregnant with her third child and while she tried to go back to work in 2001, first as a receptionist and then as an optical assistant, neither worked out. Her situation was "too difficult with kids." Single women across the board often expressed feelings that 'the council' didn't do anything for them, and left them and their children particularly vulnerable to homelessness, relocation and disruption when domestic relationships soured.

8.4 Cultural values

While friends and family can be important sources of support, such strong social support can also be constricting and limiting. For women in the Asian community, cultural norms were often expressed as being restrictive, both in terms of lifestyle, such as smoking or having a boyfriend, as well as in relation to working, although they also appear to be lessening with time. One young mother, Fatima, entered into an arranged marriage at the age of 18, after being engaged at 15, at which time she was taken out of school. Her parents, who live a few doors down from her house, have since changed their mind about educating girls before marriage, as Fatima said: "they now know the benefits of keeping their daughters in school and not letting them get married until after they have finished." But barriers to work and education still feature prominently in the lives of women from this

community, as one woman noted, "My family and community aren't supportive of women working outside the home".

8.5 Lack of social connections

Social connections can be both positive and negative in relation to work related aspirations and motivations, but, and as our research found, a lack of social connections can be particularly debilitating, and can have negative impacts on people's wellbeing and mental health and also, for a number of single women, on the lives of their children. Social isolation was a continual theme uncovered throughout our research, affecting men, women, parents, singles, and older people. This isolation, was often expressed as a desire to "keep to one's self" out of fear of others. But was also frequently tied to the fact that people "simply doesn't have the money to leave the house," leaving them feeling like they were "going crazy", "climbing the walls", or simply "bored".

Deteriorating mental health and isolation is not helpful in giving people the confidence they need to look for work, nor is it good for their children. For a number of single mothers, their social isolation extended to their children, and the days we visited with them, which they called 'typical', were spent on the sofa, with the TV on in the background, or at the local park. Isolation was in part also a result of finances, as Stacey told us, "[I] simply don't have the money to leave the house most of the time." Single mums spent most of their time at home with their children. This also reduced children's social networks, especially during the school holidays.

A lack of social connections, in addition to being bad for ones health and wellbeing, is also not good for looking for or finding work. While our research found that people find work through a variety of means and mechanisms, including employment support services, the internet, job fairs and friends and family, there is a real perception that the best way to find work is through social connections.

For some communities, this is truer than others, and our research found that social connections are often very important to finding work within immigrant communities. In particular, women living in culturally restrictive homes often rely upon male family members to look for work for them, as one Afghani woman said, "my father frequently goes to shops to see if they can take me on." Even where social connections aren't directly responsible for helping people find work, they often serve as important sources of information, support and guidance. One young father heard about apprenticeships through a mate 'after finishing a year at college', a job he held for two years until being made redundant. Another man, CJ, got help putting together his CV by a friend who worked in customer relations, which "boosted his confidence". Finally, in some places, working at certain places "runs in the family," like Mia, whose Nan, brother and father have all worked in the same factory. Such relationships can be helpful in making the connections that lead to jobs.

This can create a vicious circle. The experience of worklessness also amplifies problems of social isolation. Work opens up new social networks, especially for those living alone in neighbourhoods where they know few people. Without work many people retreated into their homes and their social networks diminished. This seemed to be especially true of men living alone, and many of the participants living in Shard End, where family and community tended to play a lesser role than in Washwood Heath. In Shard End, Patrick rarely left the house believing “the less people know you, the better.” Leroy was more willing to engage with his community, but again knew few people. He had no attachment to the neighbourhood or city. Steve spoke with comfort about how the girls at Muffin Break in the Bullring knew him. He’d lost contact with most of his family apart from his sister and had one friend who he had not seen in sometime.

Social contexts and relationships are integral to people’s motivations, perceptions and ability to find work. For many people, these networks offer support, guidance, confidence building and connections to jobs, for others they are more restrictive, and can diminish prospects. Our research uncovered a worrying trend of social isolation in many places, even amongst individuals in communities where ‘bonding’ capital is typically considered strong. Such isolation, coupled with the increasing ‘fear’ of others that many individuals expressed, can serve to shut down networks and relationships that can be important for finding work, but perhaps more worryingly, dampen confidence and have a negative effect on mental health.

PART III

Practical implications of the research

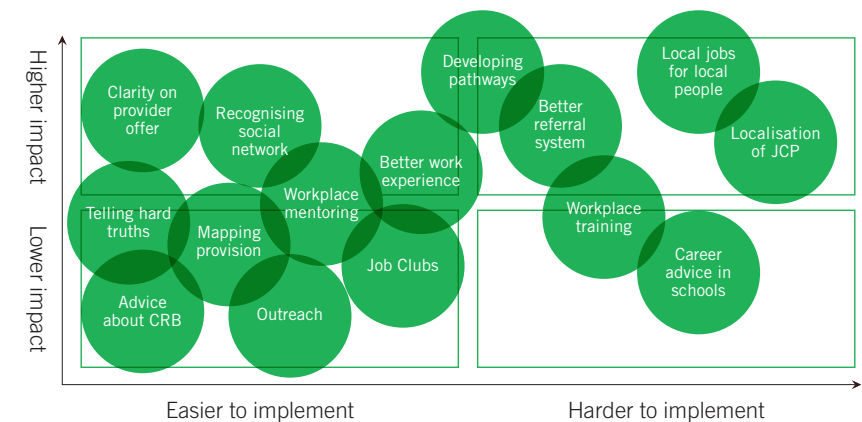
9 Potential improvements and innovations

Birmingham City Council, its partners and the local 'employability service' providers have all worked incredibly hard to help tackle worklessness in the city. Together they have seen the JSA claimant rate fall significantly over the last few years. However, the recent recession is applying pressure to the system across the city, and so we are all looking for improvements to the existing infrastructure and new approaches.

Rather than focus on good practice elsewhere, or review the effectiveness of existing services to jobseekers in Birmingham, this research has focused on the stories and voices of the workless in two areas of the city. These experiences speak for themselves, but we have shared them with a number of local practitioners and policy makers to consider what resonated most, what was surprising and most of all, what the wider implications are. The service design day introduced people to the stories and used an innovation framework to allow participants to identify the strongest themes and be inspired to think in different ways. Our experience suggests that using the research in this way, to prompt new thinking, is an excellent way of stimulating innovation.

The following themes resonated with our practitioners or were mentioned repeatedly during the research and therefore merit further investigation. A fuller write up of the service design day and experts seminars where these themes were discussed in more detail is available separately. We have first mapped these suggestions for impact versus ease of implementation and then discussed each idea in more detail.

Figure 2: Ideas for improvements and innovations to the current system.



Higher impact and easier to implement (quick wins)

- Clarity about different providers. There needs to be greater clarity of what different support services offer in a local area. At the moment clients are confused as to why there are so many and why they seem to offer similar services. Distinctions between generalist support providers and specialist support services need to be clearer.
- Recognising social networks. Many people hear about opportunities or find jobs through their social networks of family and friends. Yet there appears to be little emphasis placed on developing, expanding and effectively using these networks by the employment support providers. The failure to explicitly recognise this is an important way of finding work undermines people's confidence in the providers.

Higher impact but harder to implement (service innovations which will require long term investment of resources)

- Developing better pathways of support for specific client groups. Worklessness can be the symptom of other underlying problems which are not getting addressed. People will continue to use the employment services with little chance of getting a job. The only way to break this cycle is for people to get the particular support they require, which may well be outside the scope of the employment support organisations. Developing typologies of the different clients according to their different needs (mental health, criminal records, lone-parents, mothers returning to work, poor literacy etc). This would be best done by facilitated sessions with the frontline staff who see large numbers of people in their working lives. Referrals or particular interventions and approaches could then be designed for each typology.
- Localisation of Jobcentre Plus. The one-size fits all approach of the DWP and Jobcentre Plus should be reconsidered. Devolving these services would allow services to better respond to local circumstances and needs. This would allow local areas to develop more coherent strategies which incorporate all local employment support providers in a way that is most suitable for the needs of the local community.
- Local jobs for local people. At a planning and broader policy level more pressure should be put on employers to recruit from local communities. The lack of jobs for local people in new developments that have been built in or near these communities (for example Star City) is a source of much resentment. People feel that their jobs are being taken away and the ones that come into the area are not for them.
- Better referral system. Better referrals are needed between agencies and organisations that offer specialist support. These referrals need to be chased up and coordinated so that the most vulnerable people don't fall off the radar. Bringing experts in-house (for example by seconding Citizen's Advice Bureau staff) is an alternative approach which has been trialled elsewhere in the country and dramatically reduces the risk of the person not attending, as the expert is in the same building.

Lower impact and easier to implement (service improvements)

- Mapping provision of services across the city (public, private and voluntary sectors). This will help eliminate overlap and reduce the number of similar services being delivered by multiple providers. It will also provide the basis of developing a better referral system for people who have particular needs.
- Telling hard truths. Unrealistic expectations of the types of jobs, levels of salaries and lengths of contracts were commonplace. It was clear that these expectations are going unchallenged. Support not only involves assistance but also telling the hard truths that many of expectations are unrealistic and people will have to work their way up from often poorly paid positions to get progress.
- Better work experience: The one or two weeks of work experience organised by schools plays a key role in shaping understandings of employment and future career ambitions for young people, particular in areas of high unemployment. However, the experiences that many young people receive are often limited to low level retail work or assisting in hair saloons. They come away from the experience thinking that was work and that is what they should do when they left school. A better variety and quality of work experience would raise the young people's aspirations and ambitions. Teenagers would have a completely different understanding of work, if they returned to school talking about the variety of jobs they had experienced, saying to each other 'I did this', 'I did that', 'I want to be this' and 'I want to be that.'
- Better advice about criminal records is needed. Certain offenses restrict access to certain jobs. This needs to be made clear to people with these records. Equally, the myth that having a criminal record stops you getting any job needs to be busted.
- Job Clubs. Looking for work can be a lonely and isolating experience. The more isolated you get, the less likely you are to be able to find a job - due to lack of confidence and sapping self-esteem as well as not hearing about opportunities through friends and families. Job Clubs are one way of addressing this.
- Outreach into communities was seen as valuable and engaged many people who were not going to otherwise engage with employment support services other than Jobcentre Plus. This is particularly important in areas like Shard End where few services are available. Outreach in community centres, youth groups, health clinics, libraries, schools and playgroups are particularly effective.
- Workplace mentoring. Many of those we spoke to had struggled to cope in relatively structured environments. Even if they were successful in getting a job, there is the danger that people will not stay. The role of workplace mentors for people who have been unemployed repeatedly or for a long time is important.

Lower impact but harder to implement (service improvements which need a carefully made business case before pursuing)

- More workplace based training. Training that is not linked to work was seen by job seekers and some service providers alike as unlikely to lead to a job. Training which is connected with work placements (such as ILM programmes and the Future Jobs Fund) was seen as of great benefit and was highly sought after. The amount of generic training offered to people should be reconsidered.
- School based career advice. The resources and time of teachers and school career services are clearly stretched and they do not have the capacity to organise the high quality work experience opportunities that these young people would benefit from. An alternative solution is a social enterprise model, developing an independent not-for-profit organisation that specialises in organising and delivering high quality work experience opportunities in areas where there are high levels of unemployment and worklessness. Commissioned by a local education authority, such an enterprise would build relationships with local employers, organising work experience in a variety of companies and institutions. It would provide basic work etiquette skill training in school before the work experience fortnight, design a good work experience model with employers, and run follow up sessions in schools to manage new aspirations and help plan individual progression routes.

10 Implications for future work and the Single Work Programme

The reasons why people become workless, and why many struggle to return to the workplace, are complex. This complexity is reflected in the 50 or more combinations of benefits which jobseekers could previously have found themselves eligible for. But as the government looks to simplify the system, providing employability support and benefits through a single mechanism: the Single Work Programme (SWP), what lessons can be learnt from the experiences of those living in Washwood Heath and Shard End? All of the findings in the previous section are relevant for the future design of the SWP provision in Birmingham, and indeed other cities, but below we pick out a few of the most striking by way of conclusion.

The most common complaint from jobseekers in Birmingham was the complexity of the employability support provision on offer. Many were signed up with multiple employability support agencies, receiving the same CV classes and back to work interviews at all. Perhaps the single biggest opportunity for the Single Work Programme is to simplify the currently fragmented and duplicated market, making the system much easier to navigate. The smaller group of 20 framework providers should also help minimise the confusion, but each will need to work with sub contractors to make sure specialist local support is not lost.

Our findings suggest that work experience, and on the job training, were very important to job seekers. Paid apprenticeships, which do so much to build jobseeker confidence and motivation, remain few and far between. With the Future Jobs Fund set to go, there will be no-one but FE colleges championing such schemes. We know that training is vital, but we also know that job seekers rarely see the value of it and so it has high drop out rates. Commissioning more in house apprenticeships and in work training schemes ought to be a strong focus of SWP provision.

The Single Work Programme is unlikely to change people's motivation and confidence levels, which ebb and flow with a range of external factors. Employability Support Schemes in the future which tap into this, help build support structures around jobseekers, use local and family social networks and links to get back into work may fare better. Schemes in Manchester and Liverpool which focus on getting everyone in workless households back into work, rather than just working with individuals, are showing significant success. The Single Work Programme offers the opportunity to help families not just individuals.

As well as the opportunities for the Single Work Programme, there are two cautions emerging from our findings: payment by results and labour supply. If the Single Work Programme idea of payment by results (ie payment based on the number of people who enter and stay in employment) is to succeed, there need to be safeguards to avoid contractors only working with those people who are easiest to place in jobs. Ex-offenders, mothers returning to work and young people felt particularly sidelined by the current employability support provision.

Secondly, it must be noted that the Single Work Programme is focused on improving the quality of labour supply. But conversations with Birmingham based policy makers and the day in the life of studies suggest that 'labour demand', that is stimulating the economy and business, is equally important. Whilst there are a good number of opportunities in Birmingham, all agree that there aren't enough jobs locally. Encouraging inward investment in the region will not fall under the remit of the SWP contractors, but should not be lost. After all it is the quality of the jobs on offer, the pay, stability, and investment in employees, which will encourage long term jobless people to stay in employment rather than moving in and out of work quickly.

Annex: 'Day in the life of profiles'

Adrian

Adrian is 25 years old. He has been unemployed since he was 21. He grew up in Walsall and has lived in Washwood Heath since January 2010. Adrian has a three-year old son who lives with his mother in Great Barr. Adrian and his son's mother are no longer together and their relationship is a source of great tension for Adrian. "She's told me that if I didn't get a job then I couldn't see my son. Every time I get knock backed at a job interview I have to tell her. Every time. It gets hard. I just want to make my son proud."

Education

"School was terrible. I was a bully at primary school. I was disruptive. They sent me to a special school. They use to beat us up. They'd call it restraints but when some massive bloke has some kid's arms up behind his back and knocks you to the ground, I'd call it a beating. They'd sit on you for hours. When at senior school, everyone knew where I came from and gave me a hard time. One kid aired me out in the lunch hall. I lost it and was kicked out. My mum kicked me out and I was living in a broken old car. It's kind of hard revising with no roof over your head. I left with a couple of Ds and a C (GCSEs) when I was 16 or 17. All the way through school it showed I had no money, you know, my appearance. I was bullied because of it."

Despite his poor experience at school and lack of qualifications, Adrian is obviously intelligent. He enjoys reading and is keen to discuss the merits and flaws of various films and debates about the existence of god and the values of organised religion.

Work history

Adrian's first job was in a McDonalds. He lasted three weeks. "I couldn't deal with the happy face language we had to use. 'Mac's Up' we'd have to shout. No way." After this he signed on for a bit until his mother helped get him an office job which lasted four or five months until the company went bust. "After that I felt that I'd lost two jobs and I'm going to enjoy myself. I ended up getting into fights and that." After two years Adrian left Walsall, "The place is a ghetto. Everyone is poor. Nobody's got a job. At least in other places you see some cash on the street. Something to hope for."

Adrian went back to his mother's house in Acock's Green where she arranged jobs through people she knew in different warehouses. Adrian had three or four temporary positions. His girlfriend helped him get a job doing data entry, until the company closed its offices. "And then I got the biggest stroke of luck in my life." Adrian was knocking on doors asking for jobs when he knocked on the door of a care home. He started talking to one of the residents who had learning disabilities. The manager who was watching was impressed with his manner and attitude and invited him for an interview. Adrian became a care worker. "It was the best job I've ever had. They gave me loads of training. LDAF, an NVQ, health and safety, first aid, manual handling, infection control, medical dispensing systems, working with people with autism, diabetes, Asperger's, epilepsy, Downs Syndrome. I loved the job." Adrian left his carer job after 18 months because he had to give more time to caring for his sister who had a personality disorder. "It was down to time keeping. I couldn't be in on time."

At 21 Adrian was unemployed again. He ended up getting into trouble and now has a criminal record. He is still on probation. His criminal record now prevents him returning to care work. He has been 'officially' out of work for the last three years. "Going from working to living on benefits was a bit of a rain cheque. I started with a couple of hundred pounds in savings. That went in no time. I have trouble keeping up. We don't have any luxuries," Adrian says waving his hand around the sparsely furnished living room. "The money goes in the gas meter, and that's getting cut off. That reminds me, I must call the gas people when I'm at the job place. The calls are free there."

"How long have you been out of work?" I asked. "Officially or unofficially?" "Both," I respond. "Unofficially, I've been out of work for about a year. Before that I'd been doing bits and pieces. I worked as a roofer for a while. That was through my Mum's partner. I don't have a CSES card (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) or anything, so I worked off the books until the company went bust. I'd bring in £200-250 a week." Adrian was claiming benefits at the time. He is quick to emphasise that he is "genuinely honest, but at the time I needed the money for my son." Recently, Adrian has been knocking on doors looking for gardening work. "It's taken away a lot of my pride. You always feel not good enough. It really gets you down."

Experience of employment services

When we approach the Job Centre Adrian changes. He loses his confidence. He looks anxious and keeps his head down, avoiding eye contact with anyone. He tries to find a touch screen monitor. After his third attempt, he finds a machine that is working. He scans through the local job opportunities, "Account manager, needs experience, I can't do that. Printer, can't do that. Care taker, needs experience, can't do that. Team leader, I don't even understand the job description, can't do that. Cleaning, not enough hours. Need to drive, can't do that. Security, can't do that, I've got a criminal record."

“Job centres aren’t helpful,” says Adrian. “Pertemps is better. You show more initiative if you’re going there. Employers can see you have more get up and go. They know you don’t have to go there. It’s voluntary. Going there shows you’re keen.” Adrian looks far more relaxed when he is in Pertemps. We are offered a coffee and Adrian talks to the receptionist. He feels that there is more trust and he is respected. He feels comfortable asking for help and support. Adrian spends his time following up on the jobs he’s seen in the Job Centre. He comments that he prefers to apply for jobs when you can just send off a CV. “Pertemps helped me write my CV. The Job Centre had never done anything like that. How can you get a job without a CV?”

“Training. People always talk about training, but I can’t afford it. My mate started doing a full time computing course but had no money. He dropped out. I need the money, they should give us more financial support for training. I’ve done most of my training through jobs. Pertemps convinced me to do two weeks training, selling insurance and stuff. The bloke said we were going to get jobs. I phoned back again and again, but nothing came of it.”

“Another interview came up recently. There were 15 of us in one room. We had to play some stupid game. A group interview. I’m not going to stab other people in the back to get a job. We were there for an interview, not to play some stupid game. Anyway, none of us got a job. One bloke had been in sales for five years. He didn’t get the job. Made me wonder if there even was a job. The advert is still there in Pertemps. There are always interviews. Pertemps can get you interviews, but no jobs. You lose heart after a while. It’s demoralising. I’ve had twenty interviews this year. Data entry, warehouses, all sorts. But no job.”

“I also go to Seetec. They’re not very good. The people who work there just want to earn money. I prefer the people in Pertemps. The advisor in Seetec said to lie on my CV. He doesn’t care.”

“I’m supposed to get help from the probation service. I’m still waiting to see their employment adviser. It’s been a year and half. Every month I’ve got to go over there. It’s in Perry Barr. I’ve got to talk about feelings. How are you feeling? And all that. Biggest waste of time in my life. They should be helping people get a job.”

Amir

Amir is a 31 year-old Pakistani male. He was born and raised in Birmingham. Amir receives £128.60 in JSA payments every two weeks. He’s been out of work since December 2009.

Background

Amir privately rents a bedsit in Washwood Heath paying £45 per week for his room. He doesn’t really know the two people he’s sharing with and thinks it’s better to keep his distance. His family also lives in Birmingham. His brother’s at university studying forensics, which Amir is clearly impressed by. Two of his sisters are married and not working. They have four children under 10 between them. Another sister has worked in accounts since doing a ‘work trial’ after leaving school.

Amir feels the recession has hit Birmingham hard and a lot of people have been made redundant. He thinks it’s easing off, “but with the government you don’t know what’s going to happen. People are talking about a ‘double dip recession.’ Although there’s no recession here” he says gesturing at the activity going on in the tandoori restaurant doing a brisk trade around him. He thinks it’s going to take a long time to get the economy going again. “Six billion in cuts, yea? Divided by 365 days that’s £165,000 per day. You can work around that easily. That’s what, about £5,000 per county? How many counties in England?”

Employment history

Amir has previously worked in a mobile phone shop, re-stocking vending machines (for “a good two years”), and most recently as a sales rep (for about 2-3 months). Between these he had periods of unemployment. His job as a sales rep for a company selling cardboard boxes was on and off, but he enjoyed the sociable nature of getting new business. He’d like to go back into accounts, which he did for a number of years about 7/8 years ago. It was a good job because there was good pay, friendly people, a nice atmosphere, and good work. “Good pay is £200-£250 a week after tax if you’re living on your own, £300-£350 if you have a family to support.”

Job seeking

Amir spends his days looking for work. “They’re [Job Centre advisors] really busy. The only time you can speak to someone is to sign-on or for an appointment. They are run off their feet, these guys, it’s crazy.” Amir is waiting until he hits the six month mark, when they will give him “a bit more assistance”, to see what training is offered to him. He seems reluctant to proactively go on training schemes.

At the Job Centre Amir prints off 11 advertisement slips, folds them neatly along the top and rests them out on the ridge of the kiosk. Most of the jobs pay 16-18k per year. Amir’s keen on jobs that help the community. He wanted to be a fireman, but a back injury prevented him. He’s been carrying a small article from the local newspaper about a community regeneration project around in his pocket for two weeks. They’re looking for ideas to invest in for the local community. He says he would like to volunteer to do something with the money, but doesn’t know what.

Amir looks at a hospital carer position with Kare Plus. It's a permanent position that pays £7-10.50 per hour. "Working in hospitals is a big responsibility, but I wouldn't mind. Again you need experience." The advertisement appeared contradictory, stating "Experience in a care environment is essential. We offer mandatory training as well as NVQ level 2." Amir would volunteer at a hospital if he knew there was a job at the end of it.

There's a role as a Tenancy Support Worker with Midland Mencap, which Amir prints off. It pays £7.21 per hour and previous experience is not essential. There's also a job going with Rethink, the national mental health charity. "I wouldn't mind doing that, but you need experience. NVQ Level 3 – that's fair play."

Amir doesn't have any qualifications. He dropped out of a Business Studies course at college because he was "young and naive." However, he has good numeracy and literacy skills, strong interpersonal skills and an awareness of current affairs. "You need to know what's going on in the country."

Amir is keen to work outside and seems happy to travel. There's a job milking cows in Ashfield. "Ashfield's (Kent) a bit of a distance – four hours that is. Wouldn't mind something in the West Midlands." He prints off two jobs out of town – one picking asparagus in Nottingham, the other working for the National Trust in Wales. The only job he won't do is one being a sales representative selling alcohol, which he feels he could not reconcile with his Muslim faith.

Amir also uses the internet facilities at the Central Library to contact employers. He has been going to Pertemps for about a month, after they approached him and signed him up. He likes their service as they give him very practical support, such as a daily bus pass which he uses extensively. Today his Pertemps advisor gave him information about the "Highways PFI Employment and Training Partnership" with the Council, who are looking for 10 people to work in weed and highway maintenance. There is an awareness session at 9.30am on Friday.

Amir has a refined telephone technique: first he'll make sure he's got the right person, then ask if the job's still available, then ask how he can apply. His biggest gripe is the person never being there to take the call and people not returning emails. "People often don't get back to you from emails, but you can find their details on the internet and call them."

At Pertemps he calls about a parking attendant job. "It's long hours (42 per week) and £250 [gross] a week. It doesn't really add up does it? And there will be 20 people here who applied for it." Upon calling he hears that approximately 100 people have called about the job. He calls about the National Trust 'Seasonal Warden' position which pays £8 per hour. "That would be good. That would be really good. I'd do that for free... I'd have to learn some Welsh." The person he needs to speak to isn't there, but will be back tomorrow. He wants to know if Welsh is essential, if not he'll ask her to send him an application form. Next

up is the asparagus picking job. It's £5.80 per hour, temporary for 6-8 weeks. He's happy to apply for it, but hopes it's not through an agency. He's generally distrustful of agencies, "they just waste your time. A lot of people say they just get paid to register you. I try to keep away from them."

The person he speaks with says that if he can register tomorrow he can start the next day. "But if you're earning only £20 you pay more in petrol." He's thinks about rounding up 3-4 mates to share the driving and the petrol cost to make it worthwhile. Because it's a short term contract (for 6-8 weeks) finding accommodation up in Nottingham would be problematic as he'd be tied into a six month contract. Despite this he remains enthusiastic, "I'd love it 'cause you could meet people."

Amir thinks a lot of competition, a lack of jobs and his lack of experience are the main barriers to getting a job. He feels he's not having much luck, "I don't seem to be getting anywhere", and has moments of not feeling in control of his life. "If you haven't got a job, you haven't really got a routine...you have got nothing to look forward to the next day. When you have a job you have to eat on time, sleep on time." At the moment going to the Job Centre and Pertemps seem to offer a substitute for the routine of work. "See you tomorrow!" He shouts to the staff at Pertemps as he leaves.

Amira

Amira is 28 and lives with her husband and three children in the house they own in Washwood Heath. Amira was born and raised in Birmingham. Her goal is to have a job as an immigration officer by next year and is building up the experience and skills necessary for the job, as she believes her prospects are currently limited, "who would want to employ a 28 year old who's never worked?"

Background

Amira left school when she was 15 to go to Pakistan and look after her grandmother who was unwell. Due to this she missed her GCSEs. She then left school for good aged 17 to travel to Karachi to marry her husband. It was an arranged marriage and while she stresses it has worked out well for them, she is critical of other British Asian girls being forced into arranged marriages. She speaks positively about the support now available however. "If you're at the airport now and you say to security you don't want to do it, they take you away. There's much more support than I had in my day."

While she's happy in her marriage in hindsight she feels she married and had children too young. If she hadn't married young she thinks she could have finished school, started work, had a career and bought a house. Then she wouldn't have found herself in her present situation of looking for work for the

first time aged 28. She feels her community, including her extended family, is not supportive of women looking for work outside the home and that Child Tax Credits encourage many women in her community to stay at home and look after their children. However, she wants to work, "It's not for the money. The money would be a bonus. What I want is to recognise myself. It's always 'this is such and such's daughter, mother, wife...' but I want to be known as me." She has the support of her immediate family and husband and this is important to her.

Family

Amira's children are aged three, five, and eight. The two oldest go to the local school. The youngest is looked after by Amira's parents, who live about a five minute walk away. She has an understanding with them that, if she enters full time work, they will look after her children as she couldn't afford to put them into private childcare.

Amira's husband works nights as a machine operator making the leather upholstery for cars. This works well as it means they can share the car; he takes it in the evenings to get to work, dropping it back off in the morning, Amira then uses it to travel to her voluntary job, Pertemps or take trips with friends. Amira's husband had his job for five years, until the company he was working for went bust and he was made unemployed last year. However, he was re-employed three months later by the company that took over what was left of his original employer. In Pakistan he worked as a professional tailor and he still makes all the clothing for Amira and the children. He has Friday and Saturday off. However, "He has to do his bit for the children. Two parents bring them into this world, you know? He makes dinner, does the school run... he's a good cook. He's lived in Karachi all of his life and the Karachi people know how to cook."

Amira's mother-in-law had been to stay for the past six months and left last week. Her stay caused tension between Amira and her husband. "He's a mummy's boy. It's 'yes mummy, no mummy, three bags full mummy.' He loves her dearly, but she's a horrible, horrible woman. In Pakistan husbands don't change nappies, don't bath children. She's always believed men earn, come home and eat."

Amira's parents also had an arranged marriage more than thirty years ago. Her mother had moved to England when she was very young and married Amira's father while he was still living in Pakistan. For the first 11 years he was in England he was unemployed, but for the past 22 years he's been working in a factory. Amira's very proud of him; "He started off lazy, but has done ever so well."

Amira has two brothers both of whom are married with children. One brother has recently been made unemployed. Amira thinks unemployment has been particularly tough for him as he worries about not being able to support his young child. He gets a lot of support from his parents, which helps.

Amira knows a lot of people in her neighbourhood. Most of her friends are fellow smokers, who she met while having a cigarette. She points out the stores on her road that will sell her cigarettes and those who won't. "Some Asian shop keepers don't think Asian women should smoke. I buy my cigarettes there" she says pointing to one store. "I buy my milk there." She says, pointing to the store which won't sell her cigarettes.

Job Search

Amira wants to work as an immigration officer. "I like a challenge. I want to do something new every day, whereas if you work in Asda you know you'll be stacking shelves every day. I could work as a waitress, but then I'll throw myself into that and the immigration idea will slip. I want to pursue that now." Amira's only work experience has been as a sales representative for Forever Living. The company is based on the Avon system; you buy health and beauty products at wholesale prices and then sell them onto friends and family at retail prices. "I did really well the first month, but then it went downhill from there." She did not find it fulfilling and it did not provide a structured routine, or offer career progression.

She is aware that she has little experience to draw on so she volunteers with the Refugee Council in Birmingham. There she works with two young people to help them to settle into the local community; finding them schools, helping them sign up with the local library, and giving them moral support and advice. "They have a hard life. They've come here on the back of a lorry. They can't 'just adjust'. They need support."

A friend introduced Amira to Pertemps. She feels they have given her good advice, but does not think that most people know about the services available. "Everyone knows about the Job Centre, because that's where the benefits come from." Amira's been using the computers at Pertemps to complete her maths and English Level 2 through Learning Direct. "I hated maths; I didn't think I'd ever need maths." She finds Pertemps a relaxing environment and the staff helpful. For passing the two courses she gets a £20 voucher from Pertemps. Next she's planning to go to college to get her A-levels, because "those people with A-levels get jobs as immigration officers."

Amira's experience of the Job Centre hasn't been positive. She doesn't find them helpful and doesn't trust information from their advisors because she doesn't consider it genuine. "I've been to the Job Centre countless times and they always tell me they can't help me because I'm not on JSA, which I think is unfair, because I want to work. It should be called the Job Centre for JSA only." The Job Centre advised her to go to the Citizens Advice Bureau. "Citizen's Advice tells you stuff you already know. They tell you to look on the internet. I'm already looking on the internet!"

Amira's decision to seek work as an immigration officer has given her a new focus in life. "Before, I was all over the place. I'd drop the kids off to school and then

go back to sleep.” It took a fight with her husband to change that. He left for a couple of days. “I realised, what do I have to offer my kids? What kind of role model am I? I don’t want to live off benefits.”

Anne-Marie

Anne-Marie is 34 years old and lives with her two children in a council house in Shard End under the flight path of Birmingham International Airport. She has not worked since her son was born 11 years ago. She is looking for a job in retail that will offer her flexible hours. “As long as I’m getting minimum wage and I’m not worse off, then I’m not bothered. I just want my foot in the door.”

Family

Anne-Marie’s two children, Jane 8 and Michael 11, share a bedroom. Jane likes cheese and chocolate and wants to be a zoo keeper. Michael is about to start secondary school and wants to be a game programmer when he’s older. “He classes himself as the man of the house, even though he’s only 11.” Their summer holidays are spent quietly playing in their room and on the trampoline outside. “They had them in Asda on special. I had half the money. Then my mum and brothers put in the other half. They were ever so chuffed.” Anne-Marie worries that Michael and Jane are bored being at home during the holidays. The park is a ten minute walk away and they go there sometimes or they go swimming. “I normally try and save a bit of money so we can have one special day. We’re going to the zoo next week... You have to plan everything so far in advance [financially]. We haven’t had a holiday since Jane was three” when they went to Pontins. “They keep looking at the photos and saying *when mummy gets a job we’ll go there again.*”

Jane and Michael both suffer from asthma, which is not helped by the house suffering from damp. “If I had a job I wouldn’t be living here.” They do not sleep well in the warm weather, however Anne-Marie is anxious about leaving their window open at night because their room is ground floor and faces the street. She’s been on the council housing waiting list for a bigger property for six years. She says “it makes you mad” when she sees young girls getting pregnant and getting new houses. “I’ve never asked for a lot.” When she gets a job she hopes to be able to save a deposit for a privately rented home with separate upstairs bedrooms for the children. She’s determined that Michael and Jane get a good education and jobs, so they don’t have to rely on benefits when they’re older. “I want them to see me work, so they can see me better myself. So I can rent a house and they can go upstairs to bed with the window open. I know it may not sound like a lot to some people.”

Employment history

Anne-Marie worked at the local butchers on weekends as a teenager. “I’m quite skilled. There aren’t many people who can say they can make a sausage from scratch!” When she left school at 16 she went to work in a factory “sitting on the line, putting handles on paint cans.” During her five years in the job, she was able to progress until she was “helping to run a line. Unfortunately the place isn’t there anymore. I’m sure they would have given me a job back.”

Job seeking

Anne-Marie finds the process of looking for work difficult, “you’re just expected to get on with it. I don’t think there’s enough help. Obviously you’re not going to get a job going to the Job Centre once every six months.” Anne-Marie heard of Pertemps through other mothers at her children’s school. Two of them secured work with the help of Pertemps, “you know, sitting on the till.” So at her next appointment with the Job Centre, Anne-Marie asked the advisor to refer her to Pertemps, who were reluctant to take her on at first. Anne-Marie appreciates the encouragement she’s been given so far. “They keep telling me they [jobs] are like busses. You wait, and wait, then they all come along at once.”

Anne-Marie would like to work in retail. She’s not fussy about the job. “I really don’t mind. You know I’d work in Asda. Obviously I’d like a job where I could better myself as the years go on. It’s not so much the job, rather the hours.” A dream job would be one where she would be able to pick the children up from school. She’s taken the children to the afterschool club where they would go if she was working. “I was so happy when they saw the after school club and they smiled. I was so worried they’d say *no mum.*” She’s very aware that her going to work would be a big adjustment for the children.

Anne-Marie has signed up to email updates on job opportunities from the NHS “and things like that.” She takes CVs with her when she’s out shopping and drops them off. She also keeps an eye out for opportunities with family-friendly employers. “I know Tesco and places like that are flexible. I just missed out on a Tesco not far from here. There’s another Tesco opening. But it’s really far from here. It’s three buses away. So even if I got the hours I wanted, it would take me two hours to get there and half me wages in bus fare.”

Anne-Marie’s long held ambition was to work in the field of child psychology. She approached the local college about their course. “They told me *you’ve probably left it a bit too long now. You’re probably a bit old.*” When she asked about doing it part-time they told her she had to be “fully-committed.” There was a job working at the local youth centre as a personal advisor that came with training. She wanted to apply but she only saw the job advertisement the day after it closed. “One day I’m sure there will be a perfect job. That’s what I keep telling myself anyway.” Recently she saw an old acquaintance who had returned to work after a long time off caring for her children, which has given Anne-Marie a morale boost.

Anne-Marie hasn't had an interview so far. "The more you look and try to help yourself, it's just brick wall after brick wall." She thinks the CV based selection process works against her because of the eleven year gap on her CV. "Two sheets of paper and they can judge your life on it. I just don't think it's right." Online applications are a bit hit-and-miss. "One online application they asked me what bra size I was. Then waist. That didn't sound right. I thought, no I ain't having this." She liked the Primark application because it made you think and didn't judge you only on your experience. "[In applications] You get a few tricky questions. But it's to be expected. If you've got a brain, you should be able to work it out."

"I go to bed every night thinking perhaps tomorrow I'll get that letter or that phone call. Even just an interview."

Finances

Anne-Marie receives £370.60 every two weeks. This includes her Income Support, Child Benefit, and Child Tax Credits. "You watch every penny. It's not a situation I enjoy being in." Her precariously balanced finances worry her and it is not a situation she thought she'd find herself in. "I never planned to have kids and become a single parent. I thought I'd get married and be happy and that would be that. Nobody plans to be a single parent."

Anne-Marie relies on public transport, but the cost is a big barrier to her visiting the Job Centre more frequently or taking the kids out. "It's £7.50 for a family bus fare. You can't just nip into town for a pair of shoes! Everywhere I can, I walk. But when I have the kids with me I take the bus." She only learnt the other day that Pertemps would reimburse her bus fare. "I get embarrassed asking for help with things like that... If I had to walk around on barefoot I would. That's better than asking."

CJ

CJ is a single, 35 year-old male who lives alone in Shard End. He has been out of work for two months and is looking for work in the care industry. Now that he has his CV updated he feels confident he'll find a job soon.

Employment history

CJ's last job was working in a care home looking after elderly people with dementia. He began as a volunteer and after three months he was offered a job. He was in paid employment there for a year before the job came to an end. He had been working nights, which made him unwell so he stopped. His employer was understanding, but unable to give him any day shifts so they let him go. Prior to this job CJ had worked caring for a man who had had a brain haemorrhage in his own home. CJ found this job difficult as the man was an alcoholic. "He cared more for his beer than his medication."

Ideally CJ would like to care for an individual in their own home. He prefers it because it would mean he could go out with them; take them shopping and to social engagements. Whereas with residential care home work you spend all your days in the home and the elderly never go out.

CJ's reasons for wanting to work in the care industry are twofold. Firstly, he says, "I enjoy looking after people." He also has strong Christian beliefs which he says drive him in wanting to help others. He's critical of people he has worked with, who he says are "just there for the money at the end of the week." As he puts it "If you're going to do care work you really have to care, don't you?"

CJ also believes that there are "loads of care jobs" available and little else. He has previously worked as a removal man, but now that drivers have GPS systems to guide them they no longer need someone to read the map. CJ doesn't have a drivers licence so cannot drive himself.

CJ has been invited to interviews. He had one last week, he has one tomorrow and another next week. He's worried about last week's interview because they asked him to write answers to some questions while he was there. He finds that hard. He was slow to answer and is worried it cost him the job. He prefers to fill out application forms at home where he can take his time. A friend of his who worked in customer relations helped him put his CV together, which has boosted his confidence. He has also just completed his NVQ Level 2 in Health and Social Care, which he believes makes him a strong candidate for the jobs he's applying for as it's the main qualification employers seek. He's also done dementia awareness training, basic first aid, and fire training.

CJ doesn't have the internet or a landline at home, so he often goes to his mother's house to make phone calls. She also has internet (with Facebook as her home page), however CJ prefers to receive application forms in the post and complete them at home by hand. He calls JobCentre Direct to follow-up on jobs he found at the Job Centre. Today they'll only give him details for three jobs even though he's printed off details for more. They're reluctant to give him details of a job which calls for the candidate to have a driver's license. "But I've got to try haven't I?" He pleads with them. He calls the three numbers they give him and leaves messages asking them to send him application forms in the post.

The jobs he's after pay about £6-£6.50 per hour. He says he'd be happy to work for the minimum wage. He considers a good job to be one that has a friendly working environment and understanding people. He feels confident when he's working because he's given responsibility and he has proven to himself that he can do the job. This is in contrast to his normal demeanour; he speaks quietly, walking down the road with his head down and the features of his face buried beneath a baseball cap.

Education

CJ went to Cockshut Hill School. He didn't enjoy school and left when he was 16. "Looking back I was a slow learner." He had little direction and did not know what he wanted to do. He did not receive any careers advice at school. When he left he helped his father with his central heating business and went on some youth training schemes.

He thinks the Job Centre could do more to give people ideas about what they could do with their working lives and play a bigger role in advising them. "How would you describe this? What you do?" He has never heard of a job like mine and thinks the Job Centre could do more to push people's boundaries, "You don't get many ideas about what to do. The Job Centre, they give you limited options. It's all care work or factory work, there are no interesting jobs."

CJ's also sceptical about some of the jobs on offer at the Job Centre. One company has been advertising a Removals Porter job for a number of weeks. It's 45 hours a week, Monday to Saturday, £5.80-£7 per hour, temporary on-going position for 3-6 months. CJ applied, but got no response. When he called they said they had lost his details and there was no work at the moment, yet the job is still being advertised at the Job Centre.

Benefits

CJ thinks that many people receiving the JSA are depressed. He tries "not to knock about with" friends who are out of work because they're depressed and he's worried it will rub off on him. "You get used to being on the dole, you find it hard to get off." He's been on it before, in one case for more than a year and knows how hard it can be to get back into employment after a long spell of unemployment "cause no one will take you on. Voluntary work helps." He considers himself lucky that he's been getting interviews this time around. The JSA is "not something I wanted to go on. But it pays [the bills] while you're out of work."

Personal

CJ lives alone in a council flat. His neighbours are elderly and he keeps an eye on them, including an 86 year old neighbour who's blind, who he helps with shopping. He's close to his family; his parents live a 30 minute walk away. His mum and sister also work in a care home. His mother does cleaning and ironing and his sister works in marketing and admissions. They had both worked in a local factory until it shut down earlier this year. His mother had been employed there for 14 years, and didn't take up the offer of training upon redundancy. They gave her "some numbers and things" for training, but she thought she was too old and preferred to find new work herself.

Ebony

Ebony is 21, black-British, and lives in Shard End. Ebony's passions are acting and music. She spends much of her time recording music with her friends at a record studio, and hopes to get a music deal. The day spent with Ebony, she was preparing to be a 'video girl' for a friend's music video.

Background

Ebony moved to Birmingham from London when she was 13. She has moved three times since, eventually ending up in Shard End with her mother and three sisters. Ebony's father, who she no longer has a relationship with, was abusive towards her mother. As a result, Ebony, her sisters and mother were given special housing, although Ebony claims her mother "took advantage of the system after a fight." Ebony complains that Birmingham isn't the same as London. In particular, the transport, including buses, stop running at night and the train in the city centre runs to places Ebony isn't interested in going to. Ebony also finds buses expensive. It costs £3.80 for a day pass, and sometimes when Ebony doesn't have money, she just uses the wrist bands from the day before to board the bus.

Work history

Ebony hasn't had what she calls a 'proper' job since leaving college in 2008. In the last few years, she has been volunteering and working odd jobs; most recently, she worked with ITV fixers helping to raise money for Haiti, and did a show with the Birmingham Opera last year. Ebony sometimes works handing-out fliers for the local modelling agency and has done some modelling herself. In college Ebony "became lazy." She was teaching dance part-time and helping her mum take care of her younger sisters. She dropped out temporarily and worked various jobs, including at Pizza Hut and Sports World. Work turned out to be more difficult than Ebony thought, and she left Sportsworld due to racism. As Ebony explained, "it was my first real job, so I just didn't know how to deal with it." Ebony quit instead of making a complaint, something she now regrets, particularly as she can't use the experience as a reference for future employment.

Ebony's mother is also unemployed. She held a job in the past as a care worker. As Ebony tells it, the job was taking advantage of her mother, not paying her enough and asking her to do too many things, so she quit. But her mother has other skills; she is a trained hairdresser, and just took a course to become a bouncer. According to Ebony her mother, "has a lot of skills but no work," and the work she has had "isn't worth it in terms of benefits." Ebony says, "It just never worked out for her."

Education and training

Ebony holds a BTEC national diploma in acting and an OCR Level 3 in Improving own Learning and Performance. Ebony has a mixed perspective on school; she says she "has been out of it too long and can't do anything academic." However,

Ebony increasingly realises that she might need to go back to school to have some job security as she gets older and might get a master's degree so she can teach drama. Ebony applied for, but wasn't accepted at, Central School for Speech and Drama and LIPA in London, but plans to reapply this coming year.

While Ebony did work experience at school, it wasn't a very rewarding experience. She worked at a hair salon, as well as at Adecco. According to Ebony, the teachers did not provide much advice and she "ended up choosing a few random things three weeks before the deadline."

Job seeking

Ebony uses the Job Centre, Pertemps, direct.gov and gumtree.com to look for work. Ebony also drops copies of her CV off to stores in the Bullring. Ebony had five interviews last year, but none this year and described these failed attempts as bringing down her confidence; she said "it makes it feel like it is you." Ebony has tried to learn from these failed attempts, but says she hasn't been successful in receiving feedback. She is getting help rewriting her CV from Pertemps. Her advisor told her she was being 'too honest' in her current CV, including information about her ambitions to go to a dance competition in the summer, which might make employers think she wasn't serious about work. Ebony is hopeful that the new CV will make a difference to her chances of getting more interviews and hopefully a job.

Many of Ebony's friends are in similar positions to her; they may have had casual or part-time work, but nothing 'sustainable', which is what Ebony wants. One of Ebony's friends owns a dance studio, while seven of her friends have casual work at Aston Villa stadium as waitresses, which is considered good work. Ebony has not applied for work at Aston Villa because it isn't "what [I] want to do." She would rather have a job in acting.

Experiences of support services

Ebony uses multiple employment support services. Overall, she has had negative experiences; she feels she "isn't being listened to." "You could ask for a job in a store and be given something in construction. It has nothing to do with what you are interested in." Additionally, Ebony feels like people in the Job Centre don't "treat you like a person. You could go in with a crisis and they would ask you to go over there and stand in line." She feels support agencies are "full of old sweaty men, nobody my age." Ebony feels out of place, and unwelcome, with the receptionist telling her she "looks too nice to be here."

Ebony is now on level four of JSA. She has gone on and off the JSA because she has missed her scheduled check-ins. Being on level 4, Ebony has to attend 4-Star, rather than Job Centre. However, the back and forth between the two agencies has been challenging, with one agency claiming the other is responsible for enrolling her in various programmes. Ebony also claims there are not enough good jobs, saying "it is really hard to find something in retail and other high-

demand jobs for young people." Ebony says she knows there are things for her but expresses frustration in finding out about them, "no one is telling me where to go or how to get into things."

Income

Ebony receives £100 Job Seekers Allowance every two weeks and her mum gets child benefit for Ebony's younger sisters, in addition to housing benefit. The money doesn't go very far; Ebony gets the money on a Thursday and says it is gone by Saturday. She used to spend most of her money on food, going out to pub lunches with her friends. She now saves it for clothes shopping, going home to eat or skipping meals all together. When she has money, Ebony spends most of her time in the city centre, hanging-out with her many friends and her boyfriend. She describes her friends as a "band of misfits" who are into music, fashion, acting and skate boarding. One friend recently dropped out of a five day a week college course saying, "it was too much." Another is unemployed and calls herself 'a bum'.

When Ebony's money has run out, she stays in, helping her mum with her sisters. To earn money on the side, Ebony does hairdressing and also gets money from her relatives; the most recent gift was £1000 from her uncle for her birthday. Rather than saving it or putting it towards driving lessons as was intended, she spent it.

Fatima

Fatima is a 29 year-old British Pakistani woman. She lives in Washwood Heath with her two daughters and son, close to where she grew-up. She opens her front door wearing a bright turquoise sari. Her front room, like the rest of her house, is in a slight state of disrepair, a new bathroom set sits on the floor in the front-room. She is waiting for her estranged husband to install it.

Background

Fatima left college at 15, when she became engaged. She married at 18 and had three children, now aged 11, seven and four. Fatima is still legally married, but her husband hasn't lived with her for a few years, since she caught him cheating on her while she was pregnant with their third child. When she found out, she confronted him and he hit her. He now lives with an English girlfriend. On occasion, he comes back to see the children. The last time he visited she confronted him about wanting a divorce, and he hit her again.

Looking at pictures of her family, "during the good times," Fatima says only now, since her husband has hit her again, have her parents agreed to let her divorce. When the domestic abuse started, she wanted to stay with him despite it, because she loved him. But the last time he hit her, she told her parents he could

have killed her and they finally consented to her divorce. This process is difficult, cumbersome and expensive. Fatima has to go to a lawyer, get the papers and send a letter to her husband. If the letter is sent three times without a reply, then she is allowed to get a divorce. All men have to do is say "I divorce you" three times—at no cost. For her efforts, Fatima will have to pay hundreds of pounds; money she doesn't have.

Work Experience

Fatima had two short-term jobs in 2001. First as a receptionist and then as an optical assistant, but neither worked out. Her situation was "too difficult with kids and the cheating." More recently, Fatima worked for a few days in a hospital as a nurse's assistant, but she did not like the role so she left. "I was in with old people, cleaning up after them, it was horrible, the smells were just horrible."

Job seeking

Fatima would like to work to "make something out of her life." She has dreams of taking her children on holiday, to Disneyland in Paris. Fatima wants the best for her kids; "they can do what they want, but I want them to become something, to have no regrets."

Fatima has recently started to look for work. She has always planned to go back to work "once the kids were full-time" at school. She is interested in a part-time job that fits with school hours. Ultimately she wants to become a midwife, this way, she will be able to work nightshifts, while her children are asleep, and can leave them with her parents. Fatima became interested in being a midwife when she was helping her sister-in-law give birth and found out she was "really good at helping and relaxing her." She plans, with the help of Pertemps, to enrol in an access course. In one year, she should be able to complete college and then plans to go to university for three years. Fatima recently took her maths and language qualifications through Pertemps. It only took her a week to pass the tests, "I studied it all in school and remember it."

Fatima's main barrier to gaining employment is her lack of experience. Her friends and family find jobs in various ways, including through each other. Most of the men are taxi drivers, it is "easier to be self-employed and they don't have to do anything." Women have a variety of jobs. Her sister works in an insurance agency and her other sister is going to law school. Another friend works for the city council. According to Fatima, 60 per cent of the women are housewives, or work in shops or beauty stores.

Income

Fatima lives in her estranged husband's family home. While they no longer live together, he remains responsible for providing for the family. Even though she doesn't have to pay, the accommodation is 'insecure', dependent upon the children. If she didn't have them she feels his family would have "chucked her out a long time ago."

Fatima receives income support of £100 a month and £100 each week per child, for a total of £320 a week. When she needs extras, Fatima relies on her aunt and she also participates in a 'community bank' where each member puts in £100 each month, and can take out up to £1200 at any time. Fatima also sells aloe vera products to the school and local businesses for spare change. While her income hasn't changed, Fatima has noticed prices increasing "you really have to think now. It is £1 for a bunch of coriander, whereas before it was 4 for £1". Fatima also has to pay for her £18 driving lessons and another £100 to take the test, which she has failed eight times. While Fatima gets by, money is an issue. She is particularly worried about not being able to provide extras for her kids, like class trips. Her daughter recently asked her for £30 for a two day camping trip, money Fatima didn't have.

Neighbourhood

Fatima believes the neighbourhood has changed with many Romanians moving in who she considers "really horrible, they drink, are noisy and have big BBQs outside." There are also Somalis, who Fatima says are good, keep to themselves and are generally quiet and respectful. Fatima also says violence has been increasing, claiming there are "always police cars around." But the schools are good, and help her out as a single mother, taking her four year-old into full-time school, despite a lack of places, so that she could have some time to herself and find a job.

According to Fatima, boys in her neighbourhood have "no motivation or ambition to get jobs, they just sign-up and don't do anything. They are always around, sitting around and doing nothing." Fatima thinks this is wrong, and says that they should be cut off if they haven't been looking for work for six months. Despite having fewer options, Fatima says girls have more ambition; they "want to do something with themselves."

While Fatima likes her neighbourhood, she would like to move into her own house so that she isn't dependent on her estranged husband's family. Fatima did sign-up for council housing once, the first time her husband hit her, and was offered something in Sheldon. However, the area was far from family, lacked a mosque, an Asian community, shopping and schools. "How can I make my kids go through all of that?" After Fatima turned down that offer of housing, the council says it sent a letter asking if she wanted to remain on the list. Fatima claims she never received the letter, however because she failed to respond she was taken off the waiting list. She can't bring herself to go through the process again, and would have to live in a shelter first to prove she is suffering from domestic violence. As she said, "I just can't play that game, they [the council] should know better."

Kieran

Kieran is 29 years old and lives (unofficially) with his girlfriend Julie and two children aged seven and two in Shard End. He has been unemployed for a month after being made redundant from his electrical apprenticeship. Kieran is optimistic and confident that he will find another electrical job soon.

Housing and local neighbourhood

Kieran grew up in Ward End and has many friends and family living in the area. He nods and greets people as we walk around. His father works at the Land Rover factory and his mother works in Ladbroke. Julie and Kieran moved into their two-bedroom council flat in January. Although he lives with his family, Kieran is officially registered as living at his grandfather's house so that he does not affect Julie's benefit payments. The children's room is the only room that is decorated and they have been told that their block might be demolished. Although they don't really like the area where they live, they both say it is better than staying with Julie's mother, which they were doing before being allocated their flat. "Four of us were in her spare room. She works during the day and was out, but it was difficult, you know?"

Kieran has a small car he uses to visit friends, go shopping at the Fort Centre, or take his children to a park in Chelmsley Wood, which he prefers to the local park. He is looking for work in or around Birmingham, but is happy to travel further afield. Kieran and Julie would like to leave Birmingham and live in Amsterdam, where they believe the quality of life is much better. Kieran would like to eventually train as a project manager and Julie wants to train as a florist when their youngest daughter is old enough to attend nursery.

Leisure

Kieran enjoys working out at the gym and is keen on martial arts. He is spending more time exercising since losing his job. "It keeps me sane. I'm at the gym most days. It clears my head. You've got to keep occupied and doing something positive, otherwise you'll..." He enjoys going out drinking with friends. That weekend he and Julie had been with friends in town drinking cocktails, and the previous night he had been drinking with friends at a local pub.

Education

Kieran was expelled from school when he was 14. "I didn't think I deserved it. We had to do this newspaper and I did it about the headmaster having an affair. They didn't like that. After that I was at the Key Centre doing GCSEs. I was in a class of nutters. We were only there from 9 to 12. It's no wonder I left with Fs and Es."

Employment history

Kieran's first job was at Burger King when he was 16, which lasted about a week. After that he got a job as a labourer through a friend and spent the next ten years

working in the construction industry. He ended up working for Network Rail repairing the tracks. "I ended up losing my card. You're not allowed to drink and I had been out the night before. I was tested and they took away my card. It was a blessing really. I realised I was sick of working for the minimum wage, sick of being a labourer or sweeping up, sick of working in warehouses. *I'm better than this* I said to myself and went to do electrics at college. I did it for a year. It was a struggle with money and that, but I did it. But then when I was done, I couldn't get anything. Nobody would take me on because I didn't have any experience. I started to think this was a waste of time. A year at college and I can't get a job. Then my mate told me about adult apprenticeships. That's how I got my job."

Kieran spent two years as an apprentice at a company that specialised in fitting electrics into commercial premises. "It was good. We used to be all over the place. Up in London. Uxbridge I think it was, doing a Waitrose. We'd stay down there. Get double time. They'd put us up in a hotel and pay for food. It was good money but I need to get back to my family. Did you know electricians have the highest divorce rate? It's not surprising, they are away so much. One bloke spent Christmas Day working on his own – triple time, but why do that? In July they made me redundant. Due to the recession, they said. I was gutted. Gutted."

Kieran has two qualifications (NVQ 2 and 3) but needs more experience before he can fully qualify as an electrician. "I even offered to work for free, but they couldn't do that. There's so little work out there, qualified people are dropping their prices. Electricians working for £8.75 an hour, JRB says that electricians should earn at least £12 an hour. It's tough."

Employment services

"I didn't get any advice when I was laid off. Nothing. A week's wages or whatever and that's it. Two years of working there and nothing." Kieran has a low opinion of the Job Centre. He should use the centre in Washwood Heath, but dislikes the atmosphere and the people who hang around outside. "It's a nightmare there. They drive up in Audi Q8s and then go in and sign on. You just know they're dealing." Kieran prefers to use the Job Centre in Chelmsley Wood, "This is not much better," he said as we get there. "People sitting around drinking Super Tennants all day. It's no wonder Julie doesn't like coming here. She'd get hassled, people calling her over and that. You get some dodgy characters around here. They're no place to bring kids."

"The Job Centres aren't really interested in the people. They are only trying to get people warehouse work. They don't understand people like me. I don't want any old job; I'm training as an electrician. The Job Centre should have more personalised services."

Kieran has found Pertemps helpful in shaping his CV. "I had my date of birth on there. They suggested I take it off. I'm getting more interest since that. People must look and think, he's 29, why isn't he qualified yet?" Kieran was doing a

maths course at the local Hart Centre and was introduced to one of the outreach workers from Pertemps. "She phones me up to see how I'm doing. They're good. They got me the card to work on the railways. I was doing that for two years."

"There are so many construction people out of work, they've set up a special website: Construction Skills. I'm on that most days and I'm getting quite a bit of interest. I should have had an interview the other day, but the letters go to my granddad's house and I didn't get it in time. But I'm applying for something now. I'll get something in a month or two."

Kieran is very confident that he will get another job soon. He has been out of work in the past and says that something always comes up. Kieran has just had a £1000 tax rebate and shows few signs of changing his lifestyle after losing his job. He and Julie have just got back from a long weekend in Amsterdam and they are going to pay deposits for a holiday to the Canary Islands next year. They are in the process of decorating their flat and used the vouchers to purchase wallpaper and paint from B&Q for their living room.

Kim

Kim lives in a two bedroom flat on the sixth floor of a tower block in Shard End. She is 32 years old and has a 12 year old daughter, Julie, and a two year old adopted son, James. Kim fled a violent relationship in 2007 and has been immersed in difficult legal process to adopt her son who had been the victim of extremely serious abuse. Kim describes herself as being in the process of rebuilding her life and getting a job is her next step.

Background and education

Kim was born in Shard End but moved to Northamptonshire after her parents separated when she was seven. She left school at 14 with no qualifications, after being bullied. She is the oldest of five children and spent much of her childhood caring for her siblings, as her mother was a heroin addict. Kim left Northamptonshire after 10 years in a violent relationship. She fled the house with her daughter and found shelter in a refuge. She came back to Shard End, where her father still lives, and describes herself as "rebuilding my life ever since."

Housing and local neighbourhood

We spend time in the children's play area, pushing James on the swings. Kim reflects on the neighbourhood: "This area has changed a lot. You used to be able to leave your door unlocked and as kids we could just go out to the park without being battered. That happened to Julie. She was in the park here and a group of girls surrounded her and started battering her. She had bruises all over her legs and shoulders. They were only 13-year olds. They pulled down her trousers and

everything. I called the coppers. She had to go down to the police station and had to do a video statement and everything. It was all very traumatic for her."

"There's nothing around here. No jobs. Most people don't have anything. Those that do have to go out of the area." Kim complains that her block of flats is noisy and that there is often loud music and people using drugs in the stairwells. "It really gets you down. Especially with the kids. It smells in there. Even when you go to the shops you have teenagers trying to sell you weed. I don't talk to too many people. There's Lisa who lives in my block. She's got three kids. I give her the old baby clothes and that. I help her out and she helps me. Even just a chat when we're bored. I'm the godmother to her baby."

Health problems

Kim's daughter Julie suffers from kidney stones, has numerous abscesses and a condition which has made her bladder grow abnormally large. Kim suffers from a condition which leaves her with severe pain down her back and legs. She is on high doses of prescription pain killers, including dihydrocodine and morphine patches. As a consequence of her and her children's medical conditions she spends much of her time going between the hospitals in central Birmingham and Solihull. Kim has only recently found out that she can reclaim her travel costs.

James, Kim's adopted two year old son, was the victim of serious child abuse. "His mother starved him to death. They managed to revive him and now I look after him. It was terrible. He was on tubes and all that in the hospital. He couldn't walk, talk or feed himself. He was dead at one point. Terrible." Kim is a relation and has just succeeded in getting full legal rights to look after James. However, this has been a difficult and long process and has clearly taken an emotional toll on Kim.

Finance

Kim is on income support and receives £130 every two weeks. She also gets £130 of child benefit a week. She had a problem with her housing benefit and worked up £700 of debt, which she has just finished repaying. On the day I spent with her, she had to go back to the housing offices because she had received a letter saying that she owed another £60. After queuing for ten minutes she was told she had to come back the next day to make an appointment.

"I hope you don't mind walking." She laughs as we leave the house. "I don't catch the bus much, I can't afford it." She walks to Castle Vale and back (which is three miles away) every day to take Julie to school. Kim shops in Iceland. Iceland provides free home delivery in the local area for orders over £25. "It's good for single mums. With Tesco and Asda and that, I can't do it because it's all online. Iceland, I can do the shopping and they'll bring it home that day." As we go around the shop she adds up the cost of all the items in her trolley. "I've got to add it up as I go around. I don't want to end up at the till with no money to buy it. It's happened to me before. It's so embarrassing." "And I'm crap at maths," she

laughs. Nevertheless, Kim's shopping costs £46.75 out of a total of £50. She is helped by the fact that most of the prices are in round numbers £1, £1.50 or £2, which helps Kim to keep tabs on how much she is buying. "Constantly bargain shopping all the time is exhausting," she comments.

Employment history

After leaving school at 14 Kim worked in a number of factories "Cake factories, meat factories, sweet factories, sandwich factories, all sorts. After that I had to look after an aunt who had Alzheimer's. That's when it twigged that that's what I wanted to do." Kim worked for two and half years in an elderly care home in Northamptonshire, where she gained an NVQ2 in Health and Social Care. She is enormously proud of her qualification, particularly because her abusive partner did everything to stop her finishing it. "I like working with old folk. It makes me feel good. It feels good to make them laugh."

Since leaving Northamptonshire in 2007, Kim has only worked for five weeks. She worked night shifts at another care home in Stechford, which "didn't work out." She explained that other staff accused her of falling asleep when she hadn't. "But nights are impossible with children. How can you organise childcare?" Even for the morning shifts it is not easy, "How many places can you take a toddler at 5 in the morning if you need to be at work at 6 o'clock? Nowhere will take them. It'd need to be part-time work because of the kids."

Kim is really looking forward to going back to work. She is waiting for a new house in Castle Vale, close to where her father and step-mum live. Because she's James's legal guardian, she is on the priority housing list and she would like a three-bedroom house. "Once I've got the house sorted, I can go back to work. I want to see the smiles on the old people's faces and also to have a break from the kids. To have a bit of space."

Employment services

Kim had heard about the job in Stechford through Pertemps. "They are pretty good. They give you vouchers for clothes for the interview. Blouses, skirts and all that. When you start work they give you an extra £40 for the first year." Kim accesses the Pertemps services through an outreach service they run at the local Hart Community Centre. "You have to make appointments and they come out here. I can't get to their main place in Yardley. It's two bus rides away. I know Pertemps can help with the bus fare, but I just don't have the time. I would go there. I want to do a computer course. At the moment it's my daughter and her friends who show me what to do. I have to pay at the Hart Centre."

Kristy

Kristy is 23 and lives in her two bedroom council flat in Washwood Heath with her two sons, Chris, 5, and Joel, 16 months. Her 21-year-old partner, and father to Joel, Mike, comes and goes as he pleases.

Background

Kristy grew-up in Sutton with her parents. Growing up they went on European holidays. However, Kristy describes her childhood as unhappy and says she would "like to erase [my] memory." Her parents had a bad relationship; her father would get angry and become violent. Kristy's mother, who attended university, wanted Kristy to go to Sutton Girls School, but she failed the test and was forced to go to her local school. Kristy's mother blames that school for "how her daughter turned out." Kristy's parents separated when she was 16 and she is estranged from both of them. As Kristy says, "I have no one." She describes her life as isolated and spends most of her time at home "I hate sitting in, but going anywhere and doing things costs money." Kristy has no landline, and because her laptop recently broke, no internet.

Mike, who has been in and out of prison, occasionally gives Kristy money, driving up to her on the street and pushing a crinkled £20 note into her hands before speeding off. But this is far from regular and she has "no idea what he does or where he goes," preferring not to ask. While she has tried to get away from him several times over the course of their four year relationship he "always finds her," and now she "can't imagine being with anyone else."

Education and training

Kristy left school at 15, with only a GCSE in child development. She was thrown out of exams for talking. Kristy rarely went to school because "there was just so much rubbish going on at home." When she did attend she "really liked learning what they taught." Her favourite subjects were history and English. Kristy describes herself as "one of those teenagers who hated everyone and everything." She now regrets leaving school and wishes she had "kept her head down and finished." While she left school early, Kristy has since earned two NVQs and attended training courses. While pregnant with Chris, she attended a 'young mums to be' course where she learned about IT and other skills "designed to make it look like being pregnant wasn't a dead end." After Kristy had Chris, she was homeless for a period, and was eventually allocated council housing in Erdington. While in Erdington, Kristy went back to school, attending night courses, obtaining her NVQ level 1 in jewellery making, as well as in care work.

Kristy's goal now is to be a youth or social care worker, something she knows she will have to go to college or university to achieve. She estimates it will take her 7-9 years to obtain the qualifications part-time. However she is eager for a job where she can "help other people," something she believes she is good at. Kristy also

wants a job so she can have financial control. She learned from the situation with her mother, who was dependent on her father for money, that to have stability, she needs to have control over her possessions and money. Kristy has made sure that everything in the flat is hers. That way, "if Mike leaves, everything will stay as it is." She also doesn't like asking him for money: "if I want conditioner, then I want to have the means to go buy it, without asking Mike for money."

Mainly Kristy wants to set a good example for her children so that they "understand the importance of work." Six year-old Chris has already learnt this. Kristy will ask, "What do you have to do when you grow-up?" Chris responds, "I have to take care of my wife and kids." "And how are you going to do that?" Kristy probes. "By finishing school and getting a job," Chris answers.

Work History

After leaving school Kristy worked in a cafe where she did "a bit of everything." After a few months, she became pregnant and found the smells in the café made her feel ill, so she quit. Kristy's next job came in 2008, after she moved to Washwood Heath to "get a fresh start." She worked at Care Watch as a care assistant and took the bus to Erdington every day, where she walked from house to house for her appointments, bathing and dressing elderly people. Kristy "loved this job," and was trained while working, earning good money (around £1500 per month). When she was working she had, "a great life," and was a "shopping freak." But four months in, Kristy found out she was pregnant again. Her boss pulled her aside and told her he didn't have insurance to cover her or the patients if something happened, so once again, she left. Since having Joel 16 months ago, Kristy has not worked, and has just begun her job search four months ago.

Benefits

Kristy gets £30 in child benefit every week, £40 in income support and £90 in child tax credit. She gets the money over three days; the last £40 comes on Thursday. By Saturday, she has no money left. Money is tight. On the day I visited, she gave her sons a 'snack' for lunch, however didn't eat anything herself. Kristy is embarrassed that she can't go to Asda anymore, which is where she used to shop when she was working: "I used to let him [Chris] put anything in the cart, we would buy everything. I had my card, so it didn't matter". Now she has to count pounds at Farm Fresh, something she finds "totally embarrassing." Mike will occasionally give her money, or buy the boys clothes, but he mostly spends his money on buying designer sunglasses and clothes for himself.

Job Seeking

Kristy looks for work at the Job Centre and also gets help from Pertemps, which is currently re-writing her CV. But mostly she "helps herself." Kristy finds the Job Centre "useless." The last time she went her advisor admitted to "smelling of alcohol," and replied "don't we all" when Kristy mentioned wanting a job with the council in order to get a pension. Kristy also looks for jobs in Thursday's paper. Despite these efforts, Kristy "can't seem to get anywhere." She recently applied

for three care vacancies, including one for a care home set to open just down the road. After submitting her application and not hearing anything, Kristy repeatedly called them. Finally she was told that if she hasn't heard from them, she didn't get the job.

Barriers to employment

The biggest barrier to employment for Kristy is getting childcare, both in terms of looking for work and doing it. If she brings her children to a job interview, it doesn't go well: "the employers get frustrated and I end up walking out." Kristy would like to work part-time (16-20 hours) so she can be home with her kids. Fewer than 16-20 hours wouldn't make work viable for her.

Kristy thinks that, "the whole government has it wrong" saying they, "rub us all off with the same leaf," leaving single women, in particular, vulnerable. Kristy hates her neighbourhood saying it is "full of Asians," who she says consume all the resources and get a better deal. She recalls a story of recently asking five people for directions, all of whom answered that they did not speak English. "How is it that I am living in the middle of England, in the middle of the UK and no one can speak English? What is wrong with this place?" She is also concerned about safety with fears that bombs were recently found in Alum Rock.

Leroy

Leroy is 43 years-old and has lived in Birmingham for two and a half years. He came to England as a refugee from Sierra Leone in 2002. Before moving to Birmingham he lived in Coventry where he still has many friends. He is looking for work in the care industry.

Job search

"They give me a house, they give me food, status. The problem now is a job. Everyday I'm looking for a job. Everyday I'm leaving the house at half past nine."

Leroy catches the first off-peak bus to travel to the Job Centre. He normally uses the Job Centre in Handsworth where he signed on, which is an hour bus ride from his new home and requires changing buses in the central city. He travels off-peak to save on bus fares. He carries with him a black laptop bag with a folder containing all his papers – letters from DWP, a letter confirming his leave to remain in this country and right to work, applications for jobs and letters from the council.

Leroy believes that about 70 per cent of the jobs available in Birmingham are care jobs, so that's where he is focusing his efforts. He's also interested in cleaning jobs or working in warehouses. In Sierra Leone he worked at the Ministry of Development and Economic Planning and was self-employed for a time.

At the Job Centre Leroy looks at two cleaning jobs – Cleaning Supervisor, £6.30 per hour; Cleaning Operative, £6 per hour. He also prints off details for a self-employed door-to-door market research canvasser for a manufacturing company that pays “approximately £250 per week” before the kiosk he’s using to search for jobs crashes. Leroy needs to complete one of the job applications online, so he will look to find a computer to use tomorrow, either at Pertemps or the library as he doesn’t have a computer at home. He has two mobile phones however, one of which was recently given to him by a friend. It’s £5 a month for 100 minutes with T-mobile.

After the Job Centre Leroy normally volunteers at an older people’s home, serving them tea and having a chat – “I always keep myself busy.” Today he has an interview for a care job so he skips the volunteering and instead takes the bus for an hour to the job interview. When he has a job he would like to buy a car, as he feels relying on the bus reduces his mobility and takes too much time. The journey to the job interview requires a change to the number six bus in the city centre. It travels the length of Stratford Road. The traffic moves slowly and Leroy is worried that he won’t make it to his job interview in time. He reaches it with two minutes to spare only to be told that the people he was due to meet have gone out to lunch. There was a misunderstanding and while the letter Leroy had said the appointment was at 1.30, they thought it was at 1. He takes a seat to wait for them to come back. Once the interview is over Leroy feels that it went well. They would like him to pay a deposit of £40 so they can do a CRB check for him. He doesn’t want to give them the money now as it means he won’t have any money for food, but plans to come back and give them the money next week.

Leroy has had four job interviews so far and one offer. He was turned down for this first job because he didn’t have private transport and the job was too far by public transport. The second job he did not get because he did not have NVQ qualifications. He went for his last job interview on Friday. It was for a company which has both care and cleaning jobs. He is still waiting to hear back from them.

The job offer he received he declined because it was only 18 hours per week; “18 hours is not enough to pay for things. I need 35-40 hours a week.” Taking on any job of more than 15 hours a week means he loses his JSA and housing benefit (including Council Tax). His flat is £66 per week, or £286 per month. If he worked 18 hours a week he thinks he’d be earning £300-£400 per month, which wouldn’t be enough to cover rent, bills and food. His water bill alone is £39.08 per month and he has an electric top up card for his electricity.

Finances

Leroy struggles to live on the JSA. His council flat came unfurnished and he used his Community Crisis Loan to furnish it. He bought carpet, a couch, TV, bed and microwave. Repayments are now being taken out of his JSA. Leroy uses charity shops and skimps on food to get by. The smart shirt and neat pair of jeans he wears were both bought from charity shops – “I bought them for £1.50. When I

have a bit of money, say £10, I go to Primark.” He wears tee-shirts underneath his shirt to keep warm. For breakfast Leroy has a cup of tea and something to eat. In the evenings he normally has a microwave meal at home. He’d like a gas cooker so he can make meals, but it didn’t come with his flat and he cannot afford one. He eats little during the day, consuming only a small packet of crisps brought from home after his interview.

Refugee support services

Leroy has an assigned support worker from the Refugee Support Services division of the Housing team at Birmingham City Council. It takes two bus journeys for him to get there. He speaks enthusiastically about his support worker who gives him general advice and helps him to fill in forms. Leroy obviously trusts him and they get on well. The support worker has recently sent Leroy a letter about GPs in his area so he can register with one. He’s also helping him apply for a new Community Care Grant, as Leroy’s first application was turned down. Applications need to demonstrate that the applicant is under exceptional pressure and stress. His support worker thinks the initial application was unsuccessful because it did not mention his refugee status. Instead Leroy received the Community Crisis Loan that he used to buy a microwave. This may limit his chances of a grant because a microwave is seen as a luxury.

Leroy’s support worker thinks Leroy has settled in well to England – “All he needs now is a job.” He encouraged him to go on a two week unpaid work placement at Royal Mail, but Leroy declined as there was no guaranteed job at the end of it. Leroy’s done a computer training course with Learning Direct, however he’s reluctant to undertake further training as he believes it will only delay his entry into the workforce and not improve his prospects. Friends of his have done training and received certificates, but don’t have jobs. Instead of training Leroy is concentrating on his volunteer work, which he believes will give him UK experience to put on his CV as well as experience in a sector he wants to work in.

Leroy wants to find work in Birmingham; however he has no ties to the city and is ambivalent about his long-term future there. He has no family in the city and few friends; there is a complete absence of attachment. His contact with neighbours does not go further than the occasional conversation when they’re united in waiting at the bus stop.

Most of Leroy’s friends have come from West African countries and are living in cities across England. They are also unemployed and looking for work. He has taken the coach bus to visit friends in Manchester, Leeds, Stoke-on-Trent, London, and Reading. Of all the cities he’s visited in England he likes Coventry the best as it’s quiet, “London has the most troubles, it is the most mixed.”

When Leroy has a job he wants to bring his two sons (aged 12 and 9) who are living in Sierra Leone over to the UK. His mother is also in Sierra Leone. She is unwell and he tries to send her a few pounds from his JSA as he’s her only care giver.

Mia

Mia is 23 and lives with her two children and paternal grandparents in Washwood Heath. She left her job working in a factory making blinds and curtains three weeks before the birth of her first child when she was 22. "I liked it. I still loved doing my job." She is now looking to return to factory work.

Family and neighbourhood

Before living in Washwood Heath, Mia lived with her mum, and her step-dad in Shard End, which she preferred. She feels uncomfortable by the attention she receives from some of the young Asian men in Washwood Heath. On the walk back from the Job Centre two young Asian men delivering prescriptions draw up to the curb and begin verbally harassing us and hurling insults at Mia when their attentions are not well received. Mia is visibly uncomfortable. She does not feel safe here.

Mia moved to Washwood Heath aged 14 when she was asked to move out of her mother's house, after they fell out while her mother was pregnant with Mia's little sister. It was then she moved in with her grandparents, where her father was also living at the time. He's since moved in with his partner, with whom he has two sons. His new partner has six children already. Mia also has a brother who is 18 and a large extended family.

Mia appreciates the support she receives from her grandparents. "[Living with them is] good 'cause of my kids. They're loving, hard-working, and easy to get on with." They help her out with the groceries and childcare. On the weekends her aunt (who has a car) and Nan take her and the children out. Her grandfather looks after the children when Mia goes to the Job Centre every Thursday. However, because he had a stroke earlier this year, he finds it hard to look after them for too long. Her Nan is 54, her Granddad is 63. Theirs was a shotgun wedding; Mia's dad is 40. Mia's Nan had misled her grandfather about her age.

Mia's oldest daughter is two and a half and the youngest is 10 months. Mia met her former partner through friends. They moved in together when she was 16. "After our second daughter, things didn't seem to work out anymore." They separated after seven years together and Mia moved back with her grandparents. The breakup has been difficult for Mia and during this time she started eating less. Her clothes now hang off her. At lunch she has a large milkshake, she says that normally she only eats once the children have gone to sleep. "I don't think of food very much." Sometimes she's hungry, "But it [food] doesn't come first, it usually comes last."

Her former partner is also looking for work and receives the JSA. "Because he is dyslexic, it's a bit hard for him [to find work]." He had been a carer for his sister, who had cancer, but she passed away three years ago. Today he's looking after

the children. Mia has a mobile phone, but has deliberately left it at home today. She's confident that he can look after the children and there won't be any need to call her.

Employment history and job search

When her first daughter was four months old Mia started looking for work again. She stopped looking when she fell pregnant with her second child. Mia was hoping to return to her former job at the factory, but when she was ready to go back they were laying people off so her job was no longer available. Working at the factory ran in the family; her Nan has been working there for 23 years. Her brother and father have also worked there.

Mia walks to the Job Centre every Thursday, which is the day new jobs come out. She has an appointment at the Job Centre with an advisor once every six months. However, she was told she would get a payment if she finds work for herself, which she is eager to do. She feels that at the moment "someone else is paying for me to live. Whereas if I go to work I'm paying for myself. I can't wait [to get a job]. It's independence. And then when buying things it'll feel like it's my money." Mia doesn't feel in control of her life at the moment. Not having work means she's not independent and has to rely on family for support. She'd like to buy a house sometime to give her kids an asset and roots in the community. A good job for her would be "something that's not going to pay dreadful and is permanent." She would be happy to work part time or full time; her former partner's mother is retired and can help Mia look after the children.

Mia is well presented, polite and friendly, but finds the process of looking for work difficult and is visibly anxious in the Job Centre. "I haven't got much confidence. It helps to build it up if I have to talk to other people." Mia reads all advertisements carefully. First she looks at a cooking job, which she thinks she could do because of her experience. Next she looks at a lunchtime supervisor job at a local school that pays between £7.60 and £9.35 per hour, for 5 hours a day. "I'll just take that so I have a little bit of choice. It says I can apply on the computer." She has the internet at home, and uses it to apply for jobs. She also gets her dad's help with application forms, "Some things are tricky. You think *ok what do they mean there?* I usually get my dad to help so I don't fill it out wrong."

Mia is after a job with flexibility because her oldest daughter has a twisted spine, which means she has to be taken to the hospital every two weeks to have her cast changed. Her daughter's condition was unexpected. "When you're planning kids you think they'll be perfect. Don't think something will be wrong with them." The hospital Mia takes her daughter to is located on the other side of town. The trip doesn't take long, but she needs an employer who can offer her the flexibility to do this. The cooking job would fit the bill, as would a job as a leaflet distributor that pays £250-£350 per week and asks for applicants able to work days, evenings or weekends. "Really they [employers] could be

more flexible. Some people do have problems, things going on, but want to work. [Employers] shouldn't think that just because people can't read and write properly, they haven't got as much of a right to a job as other people".

Mia queues to use one of the phones at the Job Centre. While she's waiting tempers flare. A man slams down the phone "F****g c**t" and storms off. The security guards' ears perk up whilst everyone else continues scouring for jobs, waiting for appointments and calling potential employers.

Mia is told she needs to print an application form off the internet for the lunch time supervisor job. She is told that she doesn't have enough experience for a job at Star City. Speaking to someone about a Warehouse Operative job, Mia asks if she lives too far away. She is told that it is okay, and the employer is happy to hear of her previous experience and asks her to send in her CV. She is told that if it is okay she will be invited for an interview. Mia is happy after hearing this. Two of the numbers that Mia tried to ring to apply for jobs just rang and rang and no-one picked up, which was discouraging.

In addition to looking at the Job Centre Mia "took CV's into town. I had a job interview in Argos, but they wouldn't give me a job 'cause I had a problem with my national insurance and it took ages to sort out." She also had interviews in a social club where her brother worked and at McDonalds. "But I didn't get that one." She was told she was "not suitable for the job." She finds receiving only generic feedback frustrating.

Patrick

Patrick is 54, White-British, and lives on the third floor of a dirty apartment block in Shard End. He has polio in his right arm and leg. The entrance to the building is dank, with graffiti on the walls and an overwhelming stench of urine lingering in the hall. His flat is big and clean, but sparse. On the walls are pictures of his sons from when they were young, a picture of his cousin getting married sometime in the 1980s and his NVQ2 certificate in training. Patrick has not worked in four years.

Background

Patrick has lived in Shard End for 17 years and while he lives only a few miles out of central Birmingham, he says he has not been there for years. He prefers to shop locally at Chelmsleywood Shopping Centre and Iceland. Patrick says Shard End has changed in recent years and is not as interesting as it used to be: "when I moved here it was full of people my age, but now it is classed as a problem block, with people constantly moving in and out and drug problems." Patrick suspects his neighbours of drug dealing. He has told the police, but they ask him for proof, which Patrick does not have. Additionally, while the area used

to be primarily White-British, it is now more mixed, something Patrick does not necessary like, "it's no wonder there are no jobs for British people."

Patrick has two sons, aged 24 and 21, from a marriage that ended a long time ago. His eldest son is in the army, stationed in Germany and the younger one lives with Patrick's ex-wife and works in a bar. Patrick has a good relationship with his sons, especially the eldest, who he sees about three times a year. Patrick saves his money so that, when his son is home, they can go out and have a good time. Aside from his sons, Patrick admits he "doesn't have many friends" and rarely goes out. "The less people know about you the better." He seems slightly paranoid, and is concerned about being in public because, "you never know what could happen," and with his disability he feels unable to protect himself if something did.

Education and Training

Patrick left school after receiving what he calls "a basic education." Since then, he has done training, including the mandatory four week IT training at 4-Star, his NVQ2 in direct care, and his FLG driving licence. He has most recently earned his SIA badge to become a security guard. Patrick hopes this latest training will get him a job in a factory, or supermarket. However while he has passed his test, he has to wait six weeks for the badge and his CRB check.

Patrick is solely looking for job that offers him security; he wants 35-40 hours a week with a reliable income, which would allow him to take other things as they come up, but where he "knows where the money is coming from." Job security for Patrick means more than people telling him he has work, he wants "a piece of paper to fight back with," so that if an employer tries to reduce his hours, he knows his rights.

Work Experience

Patrick spent 10 years of his life as a long-haul driver. It was hard work. Patrick would spend Sunday to Wednesday away from home, sometimes working back-to-back 12-16 hour shifts, with only short breaks in-between. Despite the long hours, Patrick liked it, particularly the camaraderie with the other drivers and the steady money. But Patrick lost his licence to drive vehicles over 7.5 tons in 1984/85 on medical grounds after having suffered a seizure. After he stopped working for long-haul companies, Patrick worked for agencies driving smaller vehicles for a number of years, but this was mainly part-time work. Patrick is tired of poor paying, insecure jobs and says, "it just isn't worth it to get a job for £5.45 that starts at 2am every morning." But these are the jobs he is mostly being offered by the Job Centre, as Patrick said, "They shouldn't expect other people to do jobs they themselves wouldn't do." He "made more four years ago," and thinks he, "shouldn't have to go backwards." The bottom-line, according to Patrick, is that he can't afford to come off of benefits. He receives reduced council tax, free rent and does not have to pay utilities. He is looking for

something that is £7 an hour and up, although the Job Centre has told him he is “never going to get a job like that.”

While Patrick is considering studying for other driving licences that would allow him to drive different classes of vehicles, employers are increasingly requiring 6-12 months experience in addition to the licence. Patrick’s disability also makes it difficult for him to find work. As a driver, he has to tell employers about his polio because if something happened and his employer did not have the right insurance to cover him, he could “be in real trouble.”

Income

Patrick receives £120 every two weeks. Patrick is completing a 52 week mandatory stint at 4-Star. Patrick likes to show his face there now and again, so that people know he isn’t “just lazing around.” While Patrick gets by financially, he finds that “being single makes it harder.” He only has one income and nobody to share the bills with. Rather than going into debt, Patrick scrimps and saves. His most important priorities are keeping his car on the road and his internet working.

Experience of employment support services

Patrick uses Job Centre, Pertemps and 4-Star to look for work. “They all say they can do this, do that, but at the end of the day they are all the same. They haven’t found me a job.” He mainly searches for vacancies on his computer at home, or in the paper. On the day I visit, Patrick has an appointment at 4-Star. People clearly know him there; as he walks in the staff greet him. During the advice session, Patrick tells his advisor the news of passing his SIA exam and the advisor asks if he has followed-up on the jobs he applied for two weeks ago. Patrick admits he hasn’t, but applied for new ones instead. Later in the car, Patrick says he “shouldn’t be expected to look for new work and follow-up on old leads, it just costs too much money – from the phone credits, to the bus fare and stamps.” He sometimes gets free stamps from 4-Star, but says “it would be great if I had some help [financially] to look for jobs, the really practical stuff, like the calling and mailing.”

During his appointment, Patrick’s advisor tells him to go to Staffline, an agency for drivers, saying they have 3-4 month work placements, which might not be exactly what Patrick is looking for, but would at least enable him to, “tell employers you have been doing something, which is better than doing nothing.”

Patrick didn’t mention it to his advisor, but he has worked for Staffline on and off for a number of years. At Staffline it is clear there is nothing on offer that is not short-term. The managing director laments how much harder things have gotten recently, saying, “you need more insurance, more training and there is less job security.” They tell Patrick they will call him if they get anything. Another man in the office says he has a friend who works at Tesco as a security guard, and that he will pass on Patrick’s information to him to see if he can get him a job.

Leaving the agency, Patrick is not disheartened; he knows the drill and has seen it before. As he says, “I’m not willing to do short-term work, whatever I make will just be taken out of my benefit cheque, so basically I’m working for free.” Patrick also thinks that if he makes more than £95 a month he will have to pay full council tax, which he would not be able to afford.

Peter

Peter is a 23 year-old Black British man who lives with his mother, sister and three brothers in Washwood Heath. He was born in Birmingham and has lived there all his life. He has been looking for work for the past three years.

Education

Peter left school with some GCSEs, although he cannot remember the marks. He enjoyed school, especially woodwork and food technology; he once dreamed of becoming a chef. He also studied English, French, maths, history, and science. “I liked science a bit ‘cause the science teacher was funny. If you liked the teacher you gonna do well in the class.” For French he went on a school trip to Paris. He enjoyed the novelty of being able to order a Coca-Cola in another language.

After school Peter “went to college a couple of times. Did a plaster course. Laid bricks for six months. Worked at UK Mail as well.” He did not see out the college courses. “I let it go. The hours were crazy. I was lazy, so I thought F that.”

His mother is now putting pressure on him to find his own place. He is keen to do this too “I don’t want to be 25 and still living at my mums. But that won’t happen. That won’t happen.” When Peter moves into his new place he wants to furnish it nicely with “a nice TV, a recliner chair... you can’t get that on the JSA. It’s hard these days; I need to win the lottery.” He wishes he was younger, 18 or 19, and saving money, putting it away for the things he wants. He plans to start saving money when he is in work.

Employment services

Peter describes his life as boring “I wake up. Go to Job Centre. Talk to my mates... I don’t want to be sitting on the Jobseekers any more. It’s doing my head in. Going to the Job Centre is like déjà vu.”

Peter finds the process of looking for work hard. “There are hardly any jobs in Birmingham. You keep getting knocked back. All my mates work; I want a job as well.” Peter is looking for work driving a forklift. He wants a good job “anything higher than the minimum wage. A couple of pounds over.” Peter would prefer to work nights and uses the Job Centre telephones to enquire after a job as a forklift driver that pays £8 an hour. The hours are 8pm-6am. When he calls the line is

engaged so he cannot get through. He may try to get work with UK Mail again. When he was last there he was paid £105 per week. He hopes now the rates will be better as he's older.

Peter is critical of the Job Centre "The Job Centre's crap. Rubbish. They don't help you, that's the truth." He tells a story about a friend's sister who got a job through the Job Centre only to be £15 a week better off. "They can find you work when you're working for a pittance, not a proper job. It's a joke."

Peter complains that the Job Centre puts him under pressure to find work, but the jobs are not there for him to apply for. If you cannot prove you are looking for work you have your benefit cut. Peter's benefits were stopped for six months. They put him on a hardship allowance of £33 per week to see him through. He is now back on the JSA, receiving £94 every two weeks "it's disgusting eh?" It changed from the higher rate because he took out a loan from the Job Centre that he now has to pay back through his JSA. "You can't live off £100 [every two] weeks. Some people don't want to work, but it's cold for the people who do wanna work." Peter wishes the government or council would "open some easy doors. People get depressed, especially when you try 10 jobs in a week and get knocked back." However, he's not hopeful of more jobs becoming available; he thinks the agenda of the new government makes it unlikely. "The poor get poorer and the rich get richer. That's the recession. People like us feel the recession."

Peter's last job interview was with a job agency. "Interviews are alright, but you gotta be bouncy. I gotta work on my people skills." How well he does on interviews "depends how confident I feel on the day. If I don't feel confident I don't go to the interview."

Peter recently went on a forklift driving course at Phoenix Training. He enjoyed it "Phoenix is how training should be. Turn up on time. No messing about." However this has not improved his immediate job prospects. "The system's [makes it] too hard to find a job. You can have the qualifications, but you still can't get it."

Peter has a criminal record after a driving conviction, but he does not think this impacts on his chances of finding a job. As well as going to the Job Centre he looks for jobs by asking, looking in the paper and asking friends. He thinks other people find jobs "through word of mouth."

Neighbourhood and social networks

Walking around the neighbourhood with Peter it quickly becomes clear he has strong social networks. "Hey Little Man" he says bumping fists with a young boy walking down the street in a school uniform. "He's a friend's little brother," he explains. "Hey CJ." He says to another kid down the street giving him a little fist bump. Friends his own age he shakes hands with. You can't walk more than 50 meters with Peter without him stopping to greet someone. Peter explains that he

has "friends and associates." Friends are people he likes and spends time with. Associates are loser acquaintances, people from the neighbourhood who he knows.

Peter knows his neighbourhood well – the alleyways and quickest routes to places. He thinks the neighbourhood's "alright, but there are a lot of back stabbers. People talk a lot, but don't know the truth. That's like everyone's neighbourhood. It's like *East Enders*."

"See that Audi?" Peter says pointing to a car parked opposite the Job Centre. "It's the ghetto Rover. You know he's on JSA. You know [benefit fraud] is happening. How do you turn up in a £40k car and still claim your jobseekers? What's that about?"

Phillip

Phillip is 31 years-old and lives by himself in a run-down Housing Association flat in Washwood Heath. He has been unemployed since being made redundant from a job in a sandwich shop in March 2009. During the day it became apparent that Phillip had suffered from some sort of break down and I was concerned about his mental health.

Background

Phillip grew up with his family (mother, father, brother and sister) in Wolverhampton. He was unsure what his parents did for a living, but both of them worked. Phillip did not enjoy his time in education, "I was overweight and was bullied a lot." He obtained four GCSEs (in Media Studies, Sociology, Maths and Science) and left school during the sixth form, with no further qualifications.

He fondly described family holidays in Spain, Germany and Singapore. However, Phillip has experienced a breakdown in the relationship with his family that he is reluctant to talk about. He no longer has any contact with his family. The breakdown in the relationship coincided with Phillip becoming homeless and a deterioration in his mental health. At one homeless support centre Phillip was prescribed some medication, but he complained that it made him feel drowsy and "out of it." Since then he has avoided health services as much as possible – only going to the GP if he needed a sick note. Phillip has trouble sleeping and has great difficulty concentrating on a single train of thought. His conversations are hard to follow and he rapidly jumps from subject to subject, many of which appear unconnected.

Housing and local neighbourhood

Phillip has spent periods of time sleeping rough on the street. He describes it as a “scary time” when he was subject to violent attacks and considerable stress. This violence and stress continued in the various hostels and homeless centres he ended up living in.

Phillip has been living in the flat for three years. It is very sparsely furnished with few home comforts. The two seats are hidden under an enormous pile of papers and clothes. There are pools of water on the floor and patches where the wall is unpainted or wallpaper is peeling off. Phillip does not like the flat, the area or his neighbours. He has been broken into on a number of occasions. He believes that people are regularly entering his flat when he is out, eating his food, wearing his clothes and shoes and going through his personal papers. Phillip complains that the noise from doors slamming, people coughing and loitering outside his windows keep him from sleeping.

Finance

Phillip receives £128 every two weeks from his Job Seekers Allowance. “JSA can go like that. I spent two quid on a bottle cider and bought a £7.50 bus pass. They were all the luxuries I can afford. I’m trapped in this area. I want to find work. I don’t want to live here.” I asked Phillip what he did when he ran out of money. “Homeless places. At St Martins you can get a free breakfast: biscuits and tea. I go there all the time. They give out food and stuff. You just have to register.”

Phillip owes more than £2,000 to the Housing Association. There are a number of letters from solicitors lying around his flat. The debt problem started when he was made redundant from his last job in 2009 and there was some delay in Phillip organising his benefits. He has no idea how to repay it. Now his rent is paid directly to the Association as part of his housing allowance. This costs £70.19 per week.

Social life

Phillip has no friends and maintains no contact with his family. The only people he talks to are shop keepers and occasionally strangers in bars. Phillip has nobody to turn to for social or emotional support. He spends much of his time at the Central Library. He has no TV, books, or any other entertainment at home. “I get up early and leave the house. I don’t like being here.” He describes life as “boring. The same thing happens over and over again.”

Employment history

Phillip’s most recent job was at a Subway takeaway restaurant on Tyburn Road. He was made redundant in March 2009 after falling out with the manager. “You’re too slow! You’re too slow! He would shout at me.” Phillip had worked there for 18 months. Before that he worked in Directory Enquiries at Cable & Wireless for three months in 2007. “It was too boring. Just ‘hello, what number please?’ I didn’t like the people who worked there. They won’t let me wait for my tea to get

cold on a break. The break has to be long enough to let your tea cool down. How else can you drink it? They irritated me.” His only work experience has been as an administrative assistant in employment programmes in Wolverhampton in 2003/4.

Employment services

Phillip regularly goes to the Job Centre, but complains that the staff “are always telling me to use the internet. I can’t do it. I need someone to find me a job. But there isn’t anyone.” He is in the process of applying for a job at a KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) outlet which he had seen advertised at the Job Centre. He had been interviewed at the outlet several days before. He now has to complete an online test. Phillip has tried to access this on two occasions at the Central Library, where he spends much of his time. However, he has found it difficult to concentrate on the test and has not been able to get past the legal terms and conditions, which he could not understand. Phillip was more concerned about the bus routes to and from the outlet than getting the job, as he did not want to be stuck without transport at the end of a shift.

Phillip regularly visits other employment support services. He has attended Learning Direct courses at the Jet Shop and goes into any shop or stall that advertises adult learning – even those who are targeting specific groups (such as a Bangladeshi community support centre). Despite this enthusiasm, he is mistrustful of staff and is reluctant to engage with advisors. Phillip focuses on the practical benefits that services offer, for example he values the bus pass and being able to borrow a suit from Pertemps, although he has never made use of the suit service. “They give you a bus pass and can let you use a suit. It’s good.” However, later in the day he criticised the advisor who had cut back his CV to less than a page. Phillip has a CV folded up in a pocket that he carries around with him. He has no electronic copy. His understanding and experience of support in getting work appears to be limited to people re-writing his CV.

During the day, we walked by an outreach bus from the Jericho project that was parked near the Job Centre. Staff were stopping passers-by to sign them up. One of the staff recognised Phillip. However, Phillip was confused and could not remember meeting them before, even though they said he was one of their clients. “There are so many of them. They all park coaches and vans up and try and recruit anyone.”

Rashida

Rashida lives on a quiet cul-de-sac in Washwood Heath, Birmingham. The private house she has rented for the past eight years is clean, but shabby. The front and back gardens, where she plants vegetables and flowers, are a bit overgrown.

Rashida lives with her son, Ali, 11, who suffers from severe allergies and asthma. Rashida is a very attentive mother who dotes on her son, going as far as to put his glasses on his face for him.

Background

Originally from Pakistan, where her family farmed, Rashida moved to the UK with her husband when she was around 20. It was an arranged marriage. After three years of living with her in-laws, Rashida's husband met another woman. "He didn't want me anymore," she says. Shortly after this, Rashida's in-laws took her and Ali back to Pakistan to rejoin her parents. She stayed with her parents for a few months, as long as she was welcome, until her uncle convinced her to take Ali back to the UK where "his future lies." When she returned to the UK, Rashida stayed for a month with an uncle. But space was tight and Rashida and Ali soon moved into a shelter to wait for council housing. However none was available so she found private rented accommodation.

Income

Once all of her benefits are added, Rashida gets £376 a month. With this, Rashida pays for the bills, which she says are "very expensive." To get by, she goes out of her way to find good deals. She travels long distances to find something cheap and likes to compare bargains: "I will go from one store to the next to see what price they sell things for. One store sells for £10, the other £9 and the last £8." Rashida does not have debt, preferring instead to manage her money which can be particularly difficult because of Ali. Last year, for example, a school camping trip would have cost £26.

Education and Training

Rashida has been developing her English language skills and attends ESOL classes five days a week for 2.5 hours a day. Her main motivation for improving her English is to enable her to help her son with his homework. Rashida has no formal qualifications in the UK. She did go to school in Pakistan, up to year 10 (age 17). When she first moved to the UK she didn't speak a word of English, relying on her husband to translate.

Social Isolation

Rashida does not have many friends and does not know her neighbours, despite living there for eight years. She considers this as an advantage. In Pakistan Rashida would not be able to "spend one minute alone" and would be forced to find another husband, or live in shame. In England she can keep to herself, however this can also have downsides. The Pakistani community in England does

not visit each other often, whereas in Pakistan people are always in each other's houses. As Rashida says, "people don't come and knock on each other's doors here, they don't get together, it's probably because of the small houses, people are afraid the children will break things."

While Rashida says she likes her area, she has had problems with her neighbours. The children in the house down the road bully them when they leave the house, running up to them and making faces, or swearing. However, overall crime rates in her area have fallen: "it was worse three years ago, now there are more police on the streets and it is safer." Even so, Rashida does not let Ali play with other children in the area and they "don't have any English friends." The Pakistani friends she has are limited and she has few opportunities to meet other people; she no longer goes to mosque because she has finished reading the holy books, although she drops Ali off each afternoon for his lessons.

Rashida lives for her son. Since her husband left this has become, in part, a coping mechanism: "I used to sit around crying all day, thinking how bad my life is, but now I just live for Ali." Despite her close relationship with her son, Rashida gets lonely: "sometimes, when I have no one to share my experiences with, bad or good, I think I need a partner." However at the same time, she does not think Ali could handle this change: "nobody will be able to love him like his own father." Rashida is determined to see Ali succeed, and has told him that he must focus on studying and get as far as he can, "because you can't do anything without education."

Job Seeking

Rashida is beginning her search for work by asking her friends about openings, going to the Job Centre, and Pertemps. When Ali turned 11, Rashida was moved from Income Support onto the JSA. Rashida started looking for work before being told she needed to, but so far has not found anything. If she does find something, it will be her first job. Rashida is looking for a job in a school; she could be a teacher's assistant, doing arts and crafts, work as a dinner lady, or help with catering. Her main strengths are cooking and arts and crafts. Working in a local school part-time would allow her to stay close to Ali, "At this age, he still needs me, when he is older, 16-17, then I won't need to be around as much."

Rashida has not received any advice or guidance about work. She has only been to the Job Centre once, for her 'back-to-work' interview. When she asked about training, they told her to "ask at your next appointment." Rashida has just started to go to Pertemps, which she heard about through the Job Centre. She hopes these resources will help her. Rashida does not think it will be easy to find a job "there is a real lack of jobs, even for people who have degrees."

Goals and aspirations

Rashida's long-term goal other than "being with my son or a husband" would be to work in childcare, and she hopes to eventually get her NVQ in childcare

from Birmingham City College. There is a career fair in late August that Rashida plans to attend to learn about her options and get an application form. For Rashida having a job would be about more than earning money. It's about "having something to do [and] being self-reliant." She has told her son, not to "worry about taking care of me," and therefore needs to be prepared to do it herself.

Support

Despite being quite isolated from her community, Rashida knows where to go for help. She has recently applied for a home access grant for a computer and free internet. She is also in frequent contact with social security and calls them for advice on how her benefits would be affected if she went back to work. There was recently an opening for a dinner lady at a local school. The position was five hours a week and paid £52. Social Security told Rashida that if she took that job, £52 would be deducted from her benefits. She has calculated that she needs to work 16-20 hours a week to make it worth it to go back to work and spend time away from her son.

Sabia

Sabia is 18 and lives in Washwood Heath with her siblings and parents. Sabia is the eldest of eight children; the youngest is eight months. Sabia's family is from Afghanistan and has been in the UK for three years.

Background

Sabia cannot speak English, relying on her little sister, Pashawri, who is 11, to translate for her. When talking about Sabia's life, it is impossible to do so outside of the context of her family. Her mother and eldest sisters spend much of their time indoors. They have lived in this house for the past year after relocating from a house that was in a poor condition. The house has three bedrooms, a large reception room, and an outside area where the children can play. Sabia's mother, Zabi, likes England. There are schools and good public services, and it is safe, but at the same time, "you miss your own country."

Education

Sabia attends college two days a week for two hours to learn English. She has no qualifications and did not go to school in Afghanistan. She would prefer to attend English classes five days a week, so she can get up to speed, and is hoping to increase the number of classes she attends after the summer holidays. Sabia writes haltingly, writing letters backwards frequently. There is a significant chance that Sabia was illiterate when she came from Afghanistan, as she never went to school, and illiteracy is high, particularly in more rural areas, where Sabia's family comes from.

Income and support

Sabia is the only member of her family receiving benefits. Her father works as a cleaner at a leisure centre 30 minutes away, a job he secured through friends, despite not being able to speak English very well. He can communicate in Urdu with many of the staff and does not need to speak a lot of English.

The family struggles to get by financially. Sabia's father no longer receives benefits now he is in work. Sabia receives £105 in JSA every two weeks, and the family also receives child tax credits, although Zabi does not know how much that amounts to as her husband takes care of the finances. She does know, however, that the money is not enough. Her family is simply too big and there are too few people of working age. When they need money, they borrow from friends and family.

The family clearly trusts local and national government. They know who to go to if they have trouble with their benefits, and say they are in contact with the Home Office about the visa situation and requirements for citizenship. Despite not being able to speak English, they were able to move out of their previous accommodation and successfully find a new flat that meets their rental allowance from the council.

Job Seeking

Sabia seems unsure about what type of work she would like to do, although she has dreams of becoming a doctor. Sabia's job aspirations are limited in part because she has never worked outside of the home. Not knowing English and having no work experience makes finding a job for Sabia very difficult. Her plan is to go to college so she can obtain qualifications and then seek employment after that. However she also needs to earn an income in the meantime. Sabia has the additional barrier of most jobs not being appropriate for religious or cultural reasons. For example, while she counts cooking as one of her key skills, she would not be able to work in a restaurant. She feels sewing is where her talent lies. She makes elaborate Afghani women's clothes using a sewing machine she brought from home. As she said, "sewing is the only job I could do [in Afghanistan]." A job where she could sew from home would mean she did not have to put herself in positions in which she may feel compromised.

Sabia has not found the Job Centre helpful in signposting her towards training or employment. They simply sign her on every few weeks and tell her to come back again the next time. Language is not the barrier, as they have a translator. Sabia has told the Job Centre many times that she would like to open her own business, but they have not listened, nor, according to Sabia, helped her find any jobs that might suit her. They have "told her to do it [myself]." But Sabia cannot go out and ask in local shops because she cannot speak the language and more importantly in her culture it is considered to be her father's responsibility to find her a job. According to Sabia, he frequently goes to local shops to see if they might be able to take her on, but he has not had any luck.

Sabia claims she would travel for work if it were 'near-by' and would like to one day get her driver's licence. Sabia relies upon her social networks, particularly through her father and his friends, to find out about job opportunities. While she would lose benefits if she got a job, she does not mind and believes she will make more money by working than she receives in benefits.

Motivation

Sabia's main motivation for finding work is to help support her family and also to make enough money to sponsor her fiancé, who is in Afghanistan, to come to England. Sabia was engaged at the age of 15, but left Afghanistan soon afterwards. She has not seen her fiancé in three years, and she has been told immigration rules have recently changed. Where she once could be 18 to initiate a fiancé sponsorship visa, the Home Office has told her that she must now be 21, and have a significant amount of money in the bank to show that she could support him if he was unable to work. Visa and citizenship issues are a major reason the family needs more income. The children have a five year visa and the whole family hopes to apply for citizenship. Zabi said that while it is easy for the under 18s to get citizenship, for herself and Sabia, it is much more difficult, and most importantly, very expensive. They think it will cost upwards of £1200 per person to apply.

For Sabia, a job would also "occupy my time." A typical day for Sabia includes looking after her siblings or spending time with female friends at home or around the local area. Two days a week she has English classes for a couple of hours. The family's friends are mainly other Afghans, although there are also Asians and Pakistanis in the area, who they say are nice, but not necessarily people they socialise with. For fun, the family might gather with other Afghani families and have a picnic.

Stacey

Stacey is 25 years old and white-British. She lives in Shard End with her two-year-old son Cole. Stacey split-up from the father of her son after Cole was born and she only sees him to hand Cole over every weekend. The flat is dirty, the kitchen floor is covered in thick stains, and the bathroom is in serious disrepair. There is a big TV playing MTV music videos on constant loop in the background.

Background

Stacey grew-up in Erdington, about 15 minutes away from where she lives now. Many of her friends still live there. Stacey's mother and father divorced when she was two. Stacey's mother has had a boyfriend for much of Stacey's childhood and she considers him her 'real dad'. Stacey has one step-brother from her mother and three step-sisters from her father. Stacey left school at 16 with four GCSEs, "[school] just didn't appeal."

According to Stacey, the council does not do anything for her. Having broken-up with her boyfriend she applied for housing but there was none available. She was told to go to a hostel. Stacey refused to go saying, "I would never take my son to a place like that." She found her own place: a privately rented flat in a largely council-owned area. The council pays the rent and council tax, but the main problem is paying the deposit. The £500 deposit was paid for by a council scheme. She does not know what she is going to do when she wants to move. And she wants to move now as she does not like her neighbours who she says, "giver her dirty looks," and have called the council on her because of "too much noise."

Stacey spends a lot of time at home saying she "simply don't have the money to leave the house most of the time." She is also "too scared to go into town" which she thinks is "too dangerous." Stacey believes that Birmingham is the next "obvious spot" for a terrorist attack. According to Stacey, ever since Tony Blair came into power, the country "has been going downhill," there are "too many people coming in." People who Stacey feels get prioritised. If Stacey could move, she would go somewhere 'white', although she is quick to say she is not racist. But, as she states emphatically, "if my child is going to suffer school wise, and I can't get a council house or benefits and can't find work, then I am going to be really pissed off."

Income

"How do they expect you to live on this? It really amazes me. They should have to live on this amount of money and tell me how it makes them feel." Stacey receives £120 a week, including her income support, child tax credit and child benefit. With this money she has to buy nappies, food to last a week and pay her bills. She has a strategy for doing this: she pays the bills (gas, electricity, water and TV) the first day she gets paid, and then she buys food. By Thursday she might have a bit left over, but Cole is growing quickly so he needs new clothes and shoes. By Friday Stacey is out of cash. During my visit, from 11:30-4:00, Cole was fed only a slice of white bread.

Job Seeking

Stacey is confident that once she sorts out a new CV, she will find work: "If I get an interview, eight out of 10 times, I will get the job." She is also about to take her driver's test, which she thinks she might need for work. Since starting her search for work she has found only two jobs she considers worthwhile: one working at a bank, the other for the council. She has not applied yet because she would like to fix her CV first, which Pertemps is helping her with. Stacey recently went to the Job Centre for her 'back to work' interview, which she found pointless as she feels they did not help her and she left feeling frustrated. So far she likes Pertemps, especially the outreach worker who is "down to earth... [she] doesn't look down on people."

Stacey looks in the newspaper for work and uses the computers at the library. Before she had Cole she found a few jobs through the Job Centre but says the job market has changed now. She thinks “work is only getting harder to find.” Her biggest barrier to finding a job is Cole: “I can do a job just fine, it’s looking for the job that’s a problem.” Stacey takes Cole everywhere she goes but says that “when an employer sees someone coming in with a screaming kid nine out of 10 times they will say no.” Stacey thinks the council could do more to help her, and other single parents, by mailing out a list of all of the available jobs and calling to check she’s followed-up on them. “It would be much better than making me go to the stupid Job Centre.”

Work Experience

Stacey’s last job was at a shop where she did paperwork and ordered supplies. She left after she found out that she was not being paid her full wages. The employers were paying her £125 rather than £150 a week. “They can get someone in from Pakistan to do slave labour if they want.” Three weeks after quitting the job, which she says she enjoyed despite the problems, she found out she was pregnant (“a drunken accident”).

Although she has not worked for three years, Stacey has a lot of work experience. However, she has had a string of negative work experiences that have either resulted in her being dismissed or quitting. For example, she did work experience in a salon while at school, a “posh” place, where she made good money but had a negative experience with the manager. The only job that has ended well for Stacey was a Christmas contract job where she worked in a factory “picking and packing jewellery.” She took this job to “get used to working” and made £250 a week while living with her parents so it left her with a good amount of disposable income. She described this job as “brilliant, perfect.” After this job ended she found a job as the coordinator for a power league football company, a job she also liked. One day, without warning, Stacey was called into the head office and made redundant. “I was too embarrassed to ask why, so I just left.”

Stacey’s next job was at Star City casino in Nechells, where she worked the front of the house. She wore a suit, which made her “feel important.” However, Stacey often had to walk home alone after night shifts, when no buses were running, and she was followed home by men. She asked the managers for help, but they said they could not do anything so Stacey left. Stacey says she “doesn’t have a problem with authority,” but hates it when people talk down to her. After the casino, Stacey went on the JSA temporarily, eventually finding some work in a care home, where she was working towards her NVQ in care. But this job did not suit Stacey because she felt the other nurses treated patients roughly, so she decided to leave.

Aspiration and motivations

Stacey’s overall goal is to be her own boss. She would like to start her own business to “lay a good foundation” for Cole. She isn’t sure what kind of business

she would like to own, but says she was the manager of a café before, and thinks she could do well by opening a bar that is more family friendly. Stacey is not looking for any job, but the “right job”. This would pay £7.50-8 an hour, which would add up to approximately £1500 a month with £500 going towards rent, and then £1000 towards bills and other costs. She wants a job so that she is not “climbing the walls every day.” Stacey stresses that she hates benefits, she “don’t like it full-stop” and it makes her feel “like a bloody scrimping tramp.”

Steve

Steve is a 50-year-old white British male. He is single and lives in a hostel off Washwood Heath Road. He is looking for work in industrial cleaning. Steve’s last permanent job was at a printing firm; this job finished in the early 1980s.

Background

Steve describes himself as having had a “hard time over the past 7-8 years.” In 2002 Steve’s mother died aged 82. He had been her full-time carer and devoted his life to looking after her. His father had passed away many years before in 1981 – that was the same year Steve lost his kidney and had to give up work. “Dad was only 60 when he died. He smoked terrible. He used to smoke 60 a day.” He died of cancer.

Steve had a difficult time when his mum died and was admitted to hospital on three occasions. Three months after she passed away he “gave it all up” and was sectioned. “I was sectioned for about eight weeks. Still feel like it sometimes. Especially on certain dates in a month. Like on mum’s birthday; the day mum passed away; Christmas; Mother’s Day, all dates like that.” Steve is undertaking cognitive behaviour therapy and takes anti-depressants. They recently increased his dosage from 50 milligrams to 300 milligrams a day. “The 50 milligrams wasn’t strong enough.” Steve describes himself as belonging to the Church of England (“If I’m passing by I’ll stop in and light a candle for mum like”).

After his mother passed away Steve could not keep up the mortgage payments on the house he had shared with her. He’s got himself £90,000 into debt through “home improvements, like new carpets, new windows, new conservatory out the back, which cost £10,000.” When Steve’s six siblings found out they “went mad.” This led to a fallout with his five brothers (including his twin brother) and he is only slowly re-establishing contact. Steve remained close to his sister, who offered him support after their mother passed away. This relationship seems to be the only close relationship in Steve’s life. When asked about friends he replies that he has only one friend, a taxi driver, who he has not seen in some time. Steve never married and does not have any children.

After Steve sold the house he had shared with his mother he moved into a hostel, where he's still living. He seems to like the hostel. He pays £15 a week, which includes meals and bills. It has 26-30 people living there "One chap who's just moved out was living there 13 years. Just yesterday got his new flat." Steve would like to move into his own council flat, but does not seem in a rush as he sounds quite comfortable at the hostel. He finds the process of being allocated a council home confusing "it's all paper work." He does not know if or when he'll get his own home. Steve's been at the hostel for four years now, with a break of two years while he was in prison.

Prison

Steve was sent to prison in 2008 and came out this year. In prison Steve worked in the laundry "unless you were working you were locked up 24 hours a day." It was "good pay" at £16 a week. You could buy stuff at the canteen: biscuits, crisps, shower gel, tobacco, which was good for Steve as he's a smoker. "You could buy what you wanted as long as you had the money." He used to work up to seven days a week. "[I'd] start work at about 8 in the morning, till 11.30 then go back to the wing. Have lunch about 12. And then we'd be in the cells. That's when the staff would get their lunch break. Then they'd come unlock you at 2. Work 2 till 4. Go back and work at 6, till half seven. Depends how busy it was, like."

Steve would take books out from the prison library. "I used to go every Sunday afternoon and take out three to four books. I'd never read them all." He liked Ruth Rendell mysteries. Steve chose to share a cell for the company, "it's good if you had someone you could get on with." His "pad mate" got a three year term and a seven year licence. Steve had a two year sentence and no licence. "One day last week I was up here [at the Bull Ring], I look down there and I saw my old pad mate. They were trying to catch him. He's still on licence. He's breached his licence, hasn't he? There are certain areas you aren't allowed to [when on licence]. He needs to go back inside, but they have to catch him first."

Employment history

Steve left school when he was 16. He found it hard to get a job at first. His brother-in-law told him there was a job going at a printing factory. He began work there in 1974. "It was good money in them days. After tax I was on about £600 per week. It's less than that now." He worked there until 1981 when he had to leave because of his kidney trouble. Since then he's done "a bit of agency work, but nothing really." He has done some industrial cleaning, for example looking after a tower block in Castle Vale, and he would like to do it again. He has an interview lined up with Ingeus for later in the month. Since coming out of prison he has had about three interviews. He does not think his criminal record is a barrier to employment even though "sometimes they want to know what you've been in for, like."

Steve goes to the Job Centre to look for work. "There's nothing there. For industrial cleaning you need to go on transport, which I haven't got." He also looks in local papers, "like the Evening Mail." Sometimes he might pop into agencies to see what they have. He cannot remember the name of the agency that passed us his contact details or any support they have provided him. A support worker employed by JPS housing comes to visit them at the hostel twice a week. She gives advice on housing issues and training courses. Steve does not use the internet to look for jobs.

Steve seems to have some lost years, which he has little memory of, such as when he left his printing job in 1981 until he began caring for his mum in 1996. The period after her death is also sketchy until the point when he went into prison.

Benefits

Steve receives the ESA or "the new Incapacity Benefit... It works out at about £117 a week. How they work it out is £64 for expenses and then some more for severe disability." He picks up £238 a fortnight, which goes into his Post Office account. He goes to the doctor every four weeks to get a new sick note to send to the Job Centre – "otherwise they stop your money. But they've changed them; they call them 'Fit for work' notes now."

Steve claims not to know why he's on the ESA instead of the JSA, but when pressed he says it is because of his depression. He also has a problematic relationship with alcohol. He is still recovering from a broken wrist sustained after a night out when he drank too much. He does not remember falling and breaking his wrist, only waking up and realising something was not right.

Steve is taking a 12 week course run by the Norman Imiah Day Centre and the Church of Saint Matthews on the harmful effects of alcohol. He was referred on to the course by his GP and is enjoying it. "You don't realise what drink does to you until it's too late." Steve's having a blood test tomorrow to check that his liver is okay.

Trevor

Trevor is a 21 year-old white-British resident of Shard End, although he spends most of his time at his boyfriend's house on the other side of town. Trevor wears trendy jeans, a black shirt and studded belt. On the day I meet Trevor, he is taking part in his 'back to work' interview at the Washwood Heath Job Centre. He has been looking for work for six months.

Background

Trevor grew-up in Birmingham, and has lived here all his life, rarely venturing out. He has never been to London. While technically still living in Shard End with his mother, her boyfriend and his 19 year old brother, Trevor has spent the last six weeks at his boyfriend's house. His mother is pregnant, and has been making remarks about him needing to move out to make room for the new baby. Trevor has been kicked out of his mother's house before, when he was younger. Despite this, Trevor has a mostly positive relationship with his mother.

Qualifications

Trevor has no qualifications; he got F's and D's at school. While Trevor says he liked school, he admits to "not getting his head down fast enough." Trevor wishes he had gone to university right after college, but claims, "they didn't even tell me university was an option, they didn't talk about it." Trevor thinks it is "too late now," saying, "I just can't sit in a classroom and write essays."

Work experience

Trevor worked for two years in the House of Fraser. He has also worked at Paul Smith. His most recent job was a six-month contract over the Christmas holidays at Debenhams. Trevor has also done three months of voluntary work through Pertemps, with three different retailers. He did not mind this work, but had some negative experiences, particularly at Matalan: "we were only supposed to work part-time, because we weren't getting paid, you know? But the manager kept trying to make us work extra." His last placement, at Peacocks, turned into a paid position, but the hours were unstable, and dwindled to 12 hours a week, which he "couldn't live on," so he quit. Trevor has also done a number of training programmes through Pertemps, such as a confidence-building course. He thinks he might be interested in an apprenticeship, but is not sure how to go about finding one.

Income

Trevor gets £100 every two weeks, £6.50 of which is taken out to repay a debt. He frequently borrows money from family members, so when he gets his JSA it is often gone the next day. Tom and Trevor "live on nothing most of the time," and are lucky to be living with Tom's mother, where they do not pay rent. Most of the time, they spend the day hanging-out at home, looking for jobs on the internet and going into town occasionally.

Trevor and Tom use the bus to go to town, buying a daily family pass for £7.20. When they do not have the money for the bus they walk, although they sometimes jump on the back of the bus to avoid walking. Trevor does not know he could seek reimbursement for his bus fare for trips to the Job Centre.

Aspirations

Trevor wants full-time work to "get into a routine." For Trevor a job would "change my life." As he said, "I want a normal life, with no regrets. As it is, I just can't live

like this." He also wants a job so that he and Tom can go on holiday. Trevor's ambition is to become an air-steward, which would enable him to "travel and see the world." He is also interested in care work, a job his mother has held all her life and which Trevor describes as "a great, secure job."

Job Seeking

Trevor uses a number of employment support agencies. On the day of my visit he crisscrosses town three times, going back and forth to the Job Centre twice and visiting Birmingham Central Library, where he has an appointment with a job advisor. His experience with the different services varies greatly. Trevor does not like the Job Centre, complaining, "I've never gotten one job through them."

Today he has forgotten to take his sign-on book to the Job Centre, for the second time. His advisor tells him she has to send his case to review and he might lose his benefits because of "lack of proof that he has been looking for work," despite his bag full of resumes. His advisor says he will be called in for an interview to go over his situation. She fails to mention that until they have made their decision, which takes five working days, he will not get his benefits, due on Tuesday. His advisor also wants to know if he has been following-up on the jobs he has applied for, telling Trevor he should "get a name and a number of the manager so you can find out why you were unsuccessful." As she suggests, "maybe your interview skills are not very good, but if you don't know, how can you get better?" Trevor complains it is more difficult than this, "how am I supposed to follow-up on old jobs and apply for new ones too? I don't have enough money. I have to put credit on my phone, buy bus passes, I just can't do both."

Trevor mainly finds jobs by looking on the internet, attending open days and job fairs. Trevor was hired for his last job at Debenhams through a job fair. Trevor has had difficulty finding advisors who can support him in achieving his ambitions. While everyone tells him to concentrate on doing retail, because that's where he has experience, he says, "Why should I keep doing retail? I know I am not interested in climbing that job ladder or being a manager. It is just a dead-end job. It just gets me down. I haven't had any interviews, and they keep telling me just to do retail because that's all I know."

Rather than receiving help with CV writing, Trevor has had it written for him. Taking out his pile of CVs, Trevor says, "look at this, I don't even know what some of these words mean, and they lied about my qualifications." He is clearly frustrated by this process: "it's like none of them can be bothered to spend time with me, they just don't listen, and don't seem to care." CV workshops he has attended have up to 12 attendees, which do not give him the individual attention he needs.

At the library, Trevor meets with an advisor who asks him, seemingly for the first time, "what kind of work do you want to do?" She takes him through a skills assessment, telling Trevor "it is important that you find a job that gets you up in

the morning and makes you want to go that extra mile.” The advisor tells Trevor he has “a lot of good experience in retail,” but that this experience does not mean that retail is all he will ever do. In fact, as she says, “the skills you have developed and utilised at work are all transferable; communication is an employability skill.” During their session, she helps Trevor think about other opportunities to get education and training, including a part-time access course, which he could do in addition to a part-time job and potentially retain some benefits. Such a course could help Trevor become a care worker. Trevor clearly feels relieved at the end of the session at the library and says, “I feel like I have more of a handle over what is going on and what I need to do to get a job.” As he leaves, his advisor reassures him, “it’s not you, these are difficult times to find a job.”

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