

# SOCIAL SECURITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

23 AUGUST 2022

## Informal focus group discussions on employability programmes

**Committee Members in attendance:** Elena Whitham, Natalie Don, Jeremy Balfour, Miles Briggs, Pam Duncan-Glancy, Paul McLennan and Emma Roddick.

**Organisations in attendance:** The visit was hosted by the Glasgow Local Employability Partnership.

The informal discussion took place at the Bothy, a community venue located in the Cuningar Loop, Dalmarnock.

### Overview and context

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 set targets of reducing the number of children in Scotland living in poverty from 1 in 4 currently, to 1 in 10 by 2030. To keep on track with this, regular Child Poverty delivery plans must be published, the first of which was for 2018-22. This set out a number of funding streams and ambitions around reducing child poverty, one of which was Parental Employability Support Fund (PESF).

PESF aims:

- To increase overall family/household finances through an improved labour market position by:
  - increasing skills/qualifications to secure work
  - upskilling when in work
- To integrate and align employability and financial inclusion – enhancing what is already being delivered

PESF funding currently support the following projects:

**Family Finance Key Workers (FFKW) – Glasgow Life.** Holistic support and mentoring help to overcome barriers and achieve employment goals.

**Early Learning & Childcare – Education Services.** Upskilling parents with a work-based qualification which guarantees an interview for a position within an Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) setting

**Welfare Rights Officers – Social Work.** Referrals are made to this project when a higher level of financial expertise is required than the FFKWs can offer.

**Young Parents' Support Base – Social Work.** A specialist teacher and a Creative Family Links Worker help new parents adjust to their new role, supporting mental health and wellbeing to help keep them engaged with their education

**Whole Families Approach to Employability - Clyde Gateway.** A wraparound package of employability support, including upskilling and assistance with finance, health and wellbeing for the whole family, accessed via 2 High schools

**Training and Support Fund.** To improve participants' family finances through employment, by helping them to access training or support which helps them to move towards/gain employment, or progress within employment –fully flexible up to £1500 pp.

Some of the Training and Support Fund successes include – 65 applications made, 65 successful – over £50,000 spent since 1 March 21, led to 13 SVQ level 3 qualifications (there will be more qualifications but not all are currently recorded), 4 entered employment, 13 entered FE/HE/Training, 1 started MA

This all feeds into the Pathfinder project, which has a focus around getting services to work better together and aligning to make service users' experience more straightforward to navigate e.g. a No Wrong Door approach.

### **Discussion**

The Committee met with staff from Glasgow City Council (First Steps programme) One Parent Families Scotland, Family Finance Key Workers, Bridges Programmes, Clyde Gateway and Fare and around 20 participants with experience of using these services.

Committee members and participants were divided into 3 groups. The following points were raised during discussion:

**Why as a parent did you look for help with employment? What support were you interested in getting, for example, training, qualifications, help with job applications, or to get a better job?**

### **Confidence**

- One participant had moved from England to Scotland to care for a relative. They suffered a bereavement and then entered lockdown. As a result, they were out of work for several years and lacked confidence. They started working with Glasgow Life to explore different employment options and gain confidence with applications and interviews to re-enter the workplace.
- Some participants felt that covid and lockdown had impacted their confidence and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) skills had deteriorated during that period with fewer opportunities to interact outwith the home.
- One single parent lost their job just before they had a baby. They described the process of trying to find a job “terrifying”. Building confidence was a big part of the support received.
- The peer support and community support offered through programmes had helped participants gain confidence.
- One woman felt that there was pressure from family and community not to work but to stay home and look after the children and she needed support to

make the decision to work. She is now undertaking an Open University degree to improve her job prospects.

- A couple of parents advised they had been waiting for a decision on their asylum cases for 7 years and during that time they were not able to work which had impacted on their confidence.
- Some parents had to put their plans to work on-hold to help their families deal with mental ill-health caused by the pandemic.
- Some parents that had got jobs had become role models for their communities and had directed people to employment support services.

### **Accessing further and higher education**

- Some participants were looking for support to access further and higher education in order to improve their employment prospects.
- One project worker commented that courses might enable people to move into work, but they also need to move out of poverty – the courses need to train people for jobs that pay enough to escape poverty.
- Some felt that student funding wasn't adequate – and this was a barrier to improving skills and therefore a barrier to finding well paid employment that would take them out of poverty
- The interaction between student funding and social security benefits was complex and limited peoples' options – particularly in higher education.
- Some people felt that the timing of training courses at college and university should be considered alongside childcare provision and timing of the school day. One project worker suggested colleges should have more classes available from 10 til 2 instead of 1 til 4 for example. She also noted that parents need to know the class timetable in advance of accepting a place so they can consider whether it fits with childcare.
- One participant suggested there should be better after-school activity or care provision to help take-up of college places.
- It was highlighted that the learning journey is not linked up. People can get funding for an access course or for a university course but not both (however, this depends on the circumstances - both the course and the articulation route).

### **Skills**

- People described the impact of Covid-19 on the job market – interviews, applications and jobs moved online which many people found intimidating.
- A project worker from OPFS described how they work with lone parents through a five-stage process: registering, removing barriers (such as helping to find childcare), working on CVs, upskilling and doing mock interviews. They continue to offer support once a parent is in work.
- Not all refugee or asylum-seeking women were able to work in their home countries, so they were not sure what skills they had to offer.
- Some people didn't know where to start with building a CV. This was for a variety of reasons including language skills, digital skills and the change in

expectations (if it has been a long time since applying for a job). People also needed help with skills like emails.

- Some participants received help with learning English (ESOL classes) as language skills were a barrier to employment. Formal written English was a particular challenge for some participants, but many also just lacked confidence using English in a work environment. ESOL classes were seen as a first step to getting ready for employment.
- Digital skills and a lack of suitable devices were highlighted as issues. Participants noted that some applications forms are incompatible with mobile devices and few people had a laptop that they could work from. Some people did not have access to wi-fi. Many digital classes are also online so people need to overcome barriers to even join the class.
- Some participants highlighted that gaining work experience can be a challenge. Volunteering programmes were helpful for some people to address this gap.
- Some parents explained they were working long hours through work placements to gain work experience but were not getting paid.

### **Finding work**

- Participants described an overwhelming pressure from the DWP to find a job. Participating in the projects is opening other options.
- One parent explained that although she had hairdressing qualifications, she faced discrimination gaining employment in the past due to her race and was now looking at self-employment.
- Some participants have experienced difficulties getting professional qualifications gained abroad, recognised in Scotland. An architect in one of the groups is undertaking a course in quantity surveying to retrain as he cannot work as an architect in Scotland.
- There was a strong feeling that employers needed to be more flexible to help parents navigate childcare and work, and that currently 'flexibility' was rather 'one-sided.' There was a view that there were very few jobs available that match school hours. Employers aren't always clear at the start about their requirements and just expect employees to be able to work whenever they need them.
- Employer flexibility can help with childcare, particularly in 2 parent households where one parent can work early and the other can work late. However, this is not possible with many employers or jobs. If one parent has a 9-5 job, then the options for the second earner are extremely limited while still covering childcare.

### **Was other support needed to help you stay and progress in work or training, for example, childcare and transport?**

#### **Childcare**

- The cost, availability and flexibility of childcare was described as the biggest barrier to both education and employment for parents.

- The 1,140 funded hours per year of early learning and childcare (available to all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds) and Universal Credit help with childcare costs were welcomed. However, a common theme was that funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) needed to be available on a more flexible basis to fit around working hours. Related to that, parents thought that employers also needed to be more flexible to fit around school and childcare availability.
- Some nurseries don't have space – particularly where free childcare hours are supported.
- One parent suggested that ELC should be available 'automatically' - rather than having to search around for provision that provided something that matched your working requirements. "It should be free – like school". She also thought it should start at an earlier age.
- One woman said that she needed a term-time job working 10-2 each day. She sought help to find a job that would offer these hours. Some people described retraining in childcare, being successful at interview, but then not taking the job as it wasn't compatible with childcare provision e.g. fulltime, not term time so couldn't cover cost of childcare during school holidays. Term time employment is better for mothers. Private nurseries are open from 8-6 and even working part-time requires an 8-6 shift pattern which isn't compatible with caring for your own child.
- There is a lack of specialised childcare for children with additional support needs. What there is, is very expensive. One parent described how job centre staff had encouraged her to 'just stay home' rather than try to work. It can also be more difficult for the parent to leave the child as they may not feel confident that their needs will be met.
- Financial support for childcare is available during training so people can complete their course, but then there's not enough childcare support to actually take the job.
- Some people have noticed that many after school clubs have been cancelled making childcare more difficult. Others highlighted that the cost of after school clubs can be prohibitive.
- The barriers for single parents are significant.
- It was suggested that there needs to be a stronger correlation between access to employment and access to childcare.
- It was suggested that night shifts can be suitable, but it is very difficult for single parents to get childcare to do night shifts.
- Despite goodwill, relationships can break down when relying on informal arrangements for childcare

## **Transport**

- Transport costs can be a barrier. Participants expected to look for job opportunities as close to home as possible to minimise transport costs.
- Reliability of transport was described as a problem when it is used for work travel.
- Free travel is a big help.
- One participant described particular challenges as a kinship carer. Despite caring for the child for 11 years it was difficult to apply for the child's free bus

travel card as a kinship carer. Others also highlighted how difficult it was to apply for free transport cards.

- Temporary timetables cause problems.

### **Did you get that extra support, if not do you know why?**

#### **Equipment and resources**

- Some participants needed other forms of financial support to participate. This included access to laptops and digital devices.
- Some people described receiving support to buy books for study. This was considered particularly valuable given the high cost of living

### **What else would have helped improve your experience of employment support?**

#### **Welfare and benefits**

- Cost of living is a growing problem and there is an increasing number of referrals to welfare rights specialists through employment support. These referrals are not made automatically. The participant must ask questions or raise concerns for a referral to be made. Participants said that they had found out about support 'by accident,' (including but not limited to social security). One parent referred to having gone years without support before hearing about One Parent Family Scotland (OPFS) 'by accident'. Participants thought that whenever someone applies for a benefit or service, there should automatically be a check for anything else that they may be entitled to, including looking at what other support is available locally.
- Linked to the 'training and education' theme above – a number of parents and project staff discussed the complex interaction between education and social security. Benefit entitlements are very limited in higher education – and this is a barrier to staying on a course. One project worker referred to people dropping out of courses during the summer when neither social security nor SAAS funding is available. She felt this prevented people moving from Further Education into Higher Education.
- It was highlighted that the gap between benefits stopping and receiving the first pay from employment can cause real problems for people. Streamlining this or providing 'benefit run-ons' would help. OPFS also has an 'emergency fund' which can help with the gap between stopping benefits and a first wage coming in.
- The additional costs at the start of a job can be difficult to manage. Although there is a 'flexible support fund' available from job centres participants said it was difficult to access.
- One parent described how stressful it had been to apply for DLA – as it based on a deficit model – that means you have to emphasise how little someone can do and how much help they need. Self-directed support was also difficult – requiring a lot of paperwork.

- One participant reflected that sometimes you can earn less working fulltime than part-time. The “better off calculator” is a useful tool to see if it’s worthwhile taking a job. Taking the full-time job can lead to in-work poverty.
- Participants highlighted the impact of mental health as a barrier to employability. Some participants who are refugees noted that there is not enough support to overcome negative experiences in their previous countries.
- Parents in group 2 reflected how much OPFS had helped them during COVID – doing online benefit checks, ensuring parents could access all available support such as food deliveries and support for home schooling during lock-down including providing IT equipment

### **Final thoughts**

- Participants were highly motivated to work and were putting in lots of effort to secure employment over a long period of time.
- Participants felt that communication between agencies was important to successful outcomes. One participant felt each person should get a single lead contact who then talks to everyone on their behalf.
- Some participants who were refugees highlighted their desire to be contributing and working.
- Employers need to be part of employability programmes to marry job opportunities and need with training. There is evidence of this happening, but more could and should be done.