Getting a chance

Employment support for young people with multiple disadvantages

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Summary

There is concern that young people who experience multiple disadvantages receive insufficient help to find employment. Using depth interviews with 49 young people who had experienced various combinations of disadvantages, and with workers from 20 organisations providing support to disadvantaged young people, this study aimed to generate a better understanding of the ways in which their employment prospects could be improved. All of the young people interviewed had entered New Deal at some stage. They were asked for their perceptions of help received from this programme and their ideas on ways of providing better labour market support.

While changing patterns of employment and unemployment are largely due to structural changes in the labour market, personal characteristics and personal circumstances are also major influences on the labour market prospects of individuals. The report examines the effects of a range of characteristics and experiences on young people's ability to progress in current labour market conditions. Key findings were as follows:

- Care leavers were particularly likely to lack qualifications as a result of disrupted educational experiences. Lack of confidence and emotional problems could adversely affect their ability to find and keep work, and they often lacked support networks. Problems with accommodation and housing benefit rules also created barriers to employment.
- Many young people had passed through periods of homelessness, which made it difficult for them to focus on education or work. Experience of homelessness tended to mean longer and more chequered transitions into stable employment.
- Problems with drugs and alcohol could make it difficult for young people to continue in employment or education, but employment could also help young people to overcome dependence on drugs and alcohol, particularly where they had access to additional support.
- The ex-offenders we spoke to were generally highly motivated to work. Most had been in and out of temporary and casual jobs since leaving school. Employment could help young people stay clear of crime, but employers tended to be unwilling to take on people with a criminal record.
- Disabled young people were the most likely to have been excluded from any opportunities to work. Some of them clearly needed more intensive help to access job opportunities. More work also needs to be done to encourage employers to provide these opportunities.
- Young people with language and literacy problems would have benefited from more support at school and college, and a more flexible approach to meeting their needs as learners. Basic skills courses were often criticised and young people with language and literacy problems tended to prefer more individualised forms of labour market support matched to their particular needs.
- Difficulties accessing good quality childcare often created insurmountable

barriers to work for young mothers, particularly where they did not have help from partners or other family members.

Support workers from the organisations we spoke to tended to deal with disadvantaged young people who were at some distance from the labour market. They provided suggestions for ways of:

- encouraging young people to take up employment support
- helping them to set goals and prepare themselves for work
- providing opportunities to succeed
- building resilience and helping people learn to cope with rejection
- working with employers to counter discrimination and break down barriers to employment.

Their approach to the provision of labour market support, combining friendly accessible services, flexible support provided when young people needed it, specialist help with particular issues and a focus on selling young people to employers on the basis of their abilities, was largely what disadvantaged young people themselves wanted, but it is resource intensive and existing services are heavily oversubscribed. New Deal could embody many of the same elements, but its success in doing so was highly dependent on the commitment of individual advisers, who did not always have the resources to provide an intensive service. Although many disadvantaged young people valued the help they received from Employment Service advisers, some had not received the help they needed. Some found it difficult to trust them, because they had the power to cut their benefits as well as the responsibility for providing them with labour market support. Restrictions on eligibility for New Deal and on the length of time for which support could be provided also reduced the value of the programme for many disadvantaged young people.

A key finding of this research was that appropriate labour market support was highly valued by young people with multiple disadvantages. They were keen to receive more labour market support and were motivated to make an effort themselves where they saw the possibility of improved employment prospects. Inappropriate provision, on the other hand, was seen as a waste of resources and of young people's time.

The research has a number of implications for policy development in this area:

- Many young people require additional support in school, either as a result of special educational needs or because of personal circumstances such as being in care.
- Young people with multiple disadvantages have longer and more complex transitions from education to the labour market than their peers, and are likely to require support beyond the age of 19. This is particularly the case for care leavers and others who are not in close contact with their families.
- As levels of unemployment fall, the unemployed population is increasingly made up of people with multiple

disadvantages. The New Deal for Young People will need to incorporate personalised, intensive and flexible support if it is to help this group.

- Funding for employment support work needs to recognise the long-term and incremental nature of redressing labour market disadvantage, by measuring effectiveness in broader terms than simple job outcomes. It also needs to be flexible enough to allow support in at least the early stages of employment.
- Disadvantaged young people need to be given a chance. Many face discrimination from employers and have trouble getting the work experience they need. The expansion of social firms and Intermediate Labour Markets could provide one source of vacancies for people finding it hard to get a foothold in the labour market, but mainstream employers should also be encouraged to employ more disadvantaged young people.

1 Introduction

Although employment is one of the most important escape routes from social and economic exclusion, there is concern that young people who have experienced multiple disadvantages are not currently receiving sufficient help to progress in the labour market.[1] This research was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as one of a series of projects examining the issue of labour market support for people with multiple disadvantages. The study aimed to generate a better understanding of the ways in which prospects of obtaining and retaining employment might be improved for young people who have experienced multiple disadvantages.

The New Deal programme for young people, rolled out nationally in 1998, was intended as the main source of employment support for young people who became long-term unemployed, although disadvantaged young people may also receive employment support from a variety of other sources. A feature of this study is that all the young people interviewed had entered New Deal at some stage. They were thus able to compare the support that they had received from New Deal with other kinds of support that they had received or would have liked to receive.

This report is based on analysis of:

- 48 depth interviews[2] (each of which lasted for between 45 and 90 minutes) with multiply disadvantaged young people
- 20 depth interviews with workers from organisations providing employment support to various disadvantaged groups.

All interviews were taped, fully transcribed and analysed with the assistance of the latest computer software for qualitative analysis.[3] All interviews were coded in detail to explore both content-related and conceptual themes, and broader categories were constructed from the themes that emerged from the interview data. Quotes used in the report are typical of the views expressed in relation to a particular theme.

The 20 organisations selected for the study were chosen to cover a range of locations, sources of funding, ways of working and user groups. They included:

- three voluntary sector disability projects (two of which also had some statutory funding)
- one New Deal for Disabled People project involving a partnership between a further education college and local voluntary organisations
- one community college serving a disadvantaged urban area
- one National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) project providing support to ex-offenders
- one New Deal project involving a partnership between the Employment and Probation services
- two voluntary sector organisations providing support to refugees
- one voluntary sector and one for-profit organisation providing employment support to disadvantaged young people, with a focus on those from minority ethnic groups

- one social services run project providing employment support to care leavers
- one careers service project providing support to care leavers and ex-offenders
- one Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) covering a disadvantaged urban area
- two voluntary sector projects providing employment support to homeless young people and refugees
- four projects providing employment support to young people with drug and alcohol problems (two of these were voluntary organisations, the other two involved partnerships between the Employment Service and other organisations).

The support workers who were interviewed all had regular contact with service users. They were asked to describe the kinds of barriers to work that faced their clients and to discuss their preferred methods for providing support. A table summarising the key differences between organisations is provided in Appendix 1.

The young people interviewed for this study were drawn from those who responded to a national survey of more than 6,000 New Deal entrants, commissioned by the Employment Service as part of their broader evaluation strategy for New Deal.[4] Information from the survey was used to identify young people who had experienced combinations of the following disadvantages:

- problems with the law
- homelessness
- problems with drugs or alcohol
- time spent in local authority care
- disability or long-term health problems which affected work
- poor mental health
- problems with English language or literacy.

Analysis of the survey data showed that New Deal entrants who had any one of these experiences were more likely to be multiply disadvantaged than not (see Appendix 2, Table A2.1). Those who were multiply disadvantaged, in the sense that they had more than one of these experiences, also had an increased probability of experiencing other forms of disadvantage (Appendix 2, Table A2.2). Survey results also showed that patterns of disadvantage varied by gender and ethnicity (Appendix 2, Table A2.3).

In order to achieve a good representation of young people from various ethnic groups we selected young people from the three regions with the highest proportion of ethnic minorities: London and the South East, Yorkshire and Humberside, and the West Midlands. A breakdown of the depth interview sample by region, gender and ethnicity is provided in Appendix 2, Table A2.4.

2 Multiple disadvantage and the labour market

Changes in the UK labour market over the past 20 years or so have increased the risk of disadvantage for certain individuals and communities.

An individual's ability to realise his or her skills and abilities depends on both personal circumstances and on a range of external factors, including macro-economic demand, employer recruitment and selection behaviour, the nature of local labour markets, benefit rules and labour market regulation (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). Labour market disadvantage may therefore arise from deficits in individual qualities (such as lack of qualifications or previous work experience), personal circumstances (such as disability or homelessness), external factors, or any combination of these. The employment prospects of an individual are determined largely by local labour markets, and by the state of the economy more generally, but individual characteristics are also important. For instance, the shrinking number and range of job opportunities for those without qualifications has contributed to the paradox of unemployment continuing to rise, or decreasing only marginally, in areas of high job growth (Campbell *et al.*, 1998).

The service sector has seen relatively rapid job growth, but much of this has resulted in increased opportunities for part-time, temporary and low-paid employment. Recent research found that only one-third of entry jobs (those taken by individuals following a period of unemployment or labour market inactivity) were full-time and permanent, compared with three-quarters of jobs in general (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1997). 'Flexible' jobs are important to unemployed people because high turnover in these sectors guarantees a steady stream of vacancies. Changes in the benefit system have also increased the pressure on unemployed people to accept such forms of work. However, they frequently result in poorer conditions for workers, who have low levels of unionisation, reduced levels of job security, lower earnings, fewer training and development opportunities and few fringe benefits (White and Forth, 1998).

Among the 48 people interviewed, five were looking towards professional jobs and a further seven had mainly creative interests, but were sometimes pursuing them in their own time, while working in more conventional jobs to make a living. The remainder were divided between those looking for low-skilled manual work (including driving) and those looking for jobs in IT, office work, traditional male trades or female occupations such as childcare, beauty and nursing. Many young people spoke about the lack of jobs in their local areas and the difficulties they had in travelling to places where there were more jobs. More than two-thirds of those we interviewed had spent their working lives in and out of temporary, casual or part-time jobs. Several commented that in their areas only agency work was available to people with their level of skills.

There was evidence that agency jobs were easier to obtain for disadvantaged young people, as they placed less reliance on previous experience and paper qualifications. Josie, who had used an agency to find her first job after seven years of unemployment, said:

A good thing about the agencies, they don't really mind if you haven't had a job before as long as you can handle the job you're doing.

Although temporary, casual and part-time jobs were easiest to obtain, they did not provide the advantages of secure work, and most of the young people dreamed of finding a full-time permanent job, which would be a stepping-stone to further progress in the labour market. They described a number of problems with agency work, including the lack of any guaranteed income, which made it difficult to raise finance for a mortgage or hire purchase, and the lack of a stable routine, which made it difficult to arrange childcare and caused problems with benefits. Some young people felt that agencies actually prevented people from reaching the stage where they would be entitled to a permanent job, because this might damage their business. Others described the difference in value between references given by agencies, which tended to be little more than a standard covering letter, and the type of reference that might be forthcoming from a longer-term job. The insecurity of agency work was a particular problem for young people who were already suffering poor mental health related to the stress of unemployment. They described how they felt 'stuck', 'annoyed', 'frustrated' and 'messed around' by the agency routine.

The most frequently mentioned barrier to work for these young people was their lack of skills, experience and qualifications. The depth interviews showed that around two-fifths had actually left school before the statutory leaving age, and others had been poor attenders. Young people cited a broad range of reasons for disengagement from school, including:

- exclusion
- bullying and difficulties fitting in
- problems with academic work
- problems with authority, including perceptions that expectations were unreasonable or unfair
- the lure of jobs in the informal labour market
- involvement with peers who also played truant, or who were older and did not go to school.

Whatever the reason for disengagement, the result was generally that young people missed out on the opportunity to take GCSE exams. Some young people blamed themselves for messing around at school and failing to obtain the qualifications that employers were looking for. Others described how they felt unfair demands for previous experience were used to filter applicants to jobs demanding quite low levels of skill. As Fatima explained, this could lead young people into the vicious circle of no job, no experience, no job:

It's this experience, you know. I don't understand. Maybe you might need to do a course or something, but when they say 'Oh, you need experience', you know, for the work for sales assistants, or packing, or this and that, I am just thinking, wherever you go they say no. And if you don't get any job and you don't have experience, how you gonna get experience if you don't get the job?

The personal circumstances of some young people may limit their employability by affecting employers' attitudes, or by affecting

their own motivation and inclination to work. Sometimes, personal circumstances may actually restrict access to work (for instance, where disability or caring responsibilities limit the hours or range of tasks which can be carried out), although many barriers could be removed or reduced by greater flexibility in working hours and job descriptions, improvements in the built environment, the provision of personal assistance for disabled people and a greater supply of affordable childcare.

Problems relating to a lack of job opportunities were common to almost all of the young people we interviewed, regardless of the particular personal circumstances that had led them to be selected for the study. Many young people from minority ethnic groups found it particularly difficult to access the opportunities that were available, with several describing experiences of actual or suspected racial discrimination. The young people also experienced a range of specific difficulties associated with the circumstances that had led them to be selected for this research. The remainder of this chapter outlines some of these.

Time spent in care

Young people who have spent time 'looked after' by a local authority are vulnerable to a number of labour market problems. Their education is often disrupted and they are much more likely than other young people to be excluded from school. Currently, 70 per cent of young people who have been in the care of a local authority leave school without any qualifications, and only 4 per cent achieve five or more GCSEs at grade A–C, compared to a national average of 49 per cent. Educational outcomes are particularly poor for those who have spent a number of years in care (Stein, 1997; Department of Health, 2000).

Even when differences in levels of education are allowed for, young people who have spent time in care are still more likely to be unemployed or in relatively low-skilled work. Stability of care (as indicated by the number of placements) appears to be an important factor influencing stability of career path (Banks *et al.*, 1992).

Care leavers have consistently been identified as a group over-represented amongst the young homeless, and they experience a range of employment problems connected with their lack of access to permanent accommodation. Forced to cope independently from an early age, many experience financial problems and feelings of isolation. Frequent moves may disrupt education, employment or training, and can lead to an overall loss of stability for the young person. Early experiences of neglect or abuse may lead to problems in forming relationships, including those with work colleagues (Stein, 1997).

Six out of the eight care leavers we interviewed had left school before the statutory leaving age. The disruption of being moved around different care placements and different schools was a major factor leading to their giving up on education. Although difficulties associated with moving secondary schools were also a problem for some of the other young people, those who had spent time in care were particularly likely to have had to move schools several times. Young people who had experienced such disruption often felt that schools could have done more to help them

settle, and that they should make more allowances for the difficult experiences that could lead to aggressive behaviour. For Paula, who was of black Caribbean origin, the problem of moving schools was exacerbated by the fact that the new school she was sent to was predominantly white. A high achiever before she went into care, she ended up leaving school early without taking any GCSEs. Like several other young people who had been in care, she found that non-attendance at school was eventually accepted:

> *At first, they did try to send me to school but I just never went and in the end they just gave up … Everybody wasn't in school so I wasn't lonely or anything.*

Difficulties in managing financially while undertaking further education were common among young people who, for whatever reason, were attempting to live independently of their parents. Care leavers were particularly likely to be expected to manage independently at an early age and to experience problems with housing. Mary was the only one of the care leavers we spoke to who had not experienced a period of homelessness – she had gone to live with her grandmother after a relatively short period in foster care. Josie described how work and college only became a realistic possibility for her once she was again living with family members. When she was living in her own flat, she was reliant on benefits to pay the bills, and it would have been too great a risk to take up the kinds of insecure employment that were generally available.

Young people who had spent time in care were particularly vulnerable to mental health problems. Several described a period of feeling confused and mixed up, others said that they had very low self-esteem, and some had problems managing feelings of anger and dealing with situations where they were put under pressure or criticised. Tammie described how the emotional effects of her experiences at home and in care sometimes made it difficult for her to find and keep work:

> *It does affect you mentally, it gets you down, but it does make you very insecure. Because of my past and that I get like really short tempered, which makes it hard for me to hold a job. And I haven't really got the right attitude for interviews and stuff like that either because of it, really nervous and just don't feel comfortable. I didn't finish school either.*

Most of the care leavers we spoke to had a work history that combined periods of unemployment with spells of temporary or part-time work. Few had received the support they felt they needed at key times of transition, such as moving into independent accommodation or starting work. For some of them, achieving stability in their family life was more important than work at the time of the interview. Several of those who had experienced disruptions to their education would have welcomed the chance to study or train for the qualifications they had missed out on. However, none had the resources to pay for this themselves, or to live without the income brought in from benefits or work.

Homelessness

Homelessness may encompass a wide range of experiences, from living rough on the streets to staying in various forms of insecure

accommodation, such as hostels, squats and the houses of friends. Between 80 and 90 per cent of young, single homeless people are unemployed, and there is a circular relationship between homelessness and unemployment, since being homeless makes it harder to find or keep work, and being unemployed makes it harder to find or keep accommodation. Not having a fixed address creates practical problems in finding employment, including not being able to get enough rest or appear presentable for interviews, and many employers are also prejudiced against homeless people (Spilsbury and Cummins, 1997). Evaluations of the New Deal have highlighted the impact of homelessness on the employment histories of some young people, and the need for additional support if they are to obtain maximum benefit from the programme (see, for instance, Richardson and Thompson, 2000; O'Connor *et al.*, 2001).

Homelessness and living in insecure accommodation were relatively common features of the transition to living independently for disadvantaged young people. Three-quarters of those who were living alone at the time of their depth interview had some experience of homelessness or insecure accommodation. Where homelessness had been a fairly brief and transitory experience, young people often said little about its effects on their work prospects.

Care leavers were often moved into temporary or hostel accommodation and the lifestyle and low status associated with living in such accommodation could set them apart from people with a working lifestyle:

> *The life in B and B is not associated with working. I'm sorry, it's like you feel you're the bottom of the heap in it.* (Paula)

Amber had moved around a number of shared houses and squats, living with friends who were heavily involved with drugs. She described some of the problems this had caused her in terms of finding a job:

> *I was squatting for a while and that was an issue because, like, at the chemist job, he lived just round the corner from the squat and because it's obviously a squat I knew I couldn't put my real address down … because he was quite sort of narrow-minded in that way … If you're moving addresses all the time and then you've got to put down that you keep moving addresses, then people find it funny … I was using my mum's address mainly … I use* [her] *address all the time now because I've moved around so much in the last few years.*

For a number of young people, periods of homelessness were associated with drug use or mental health problems. The combination of these problems sometimes meant that it was impossible to hold down a job.

Young people who lived at some distance from their parents appeared to be particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Two of the young men we interviewed had moved to the UK without their parents, in order to pursue their education, and both had subsequently experienced homelessness. Another young man went to live in a hostel when his parents returned to the Caribbean. He spoke about some of the difficulties of continuing in education without the financial and other support that parents would normally provide:

You live in a hostel or whatever you don't get like 'Here's lunch money' or a fiver and all that sort of thing … When we used to go college when we were in the hostel, it used to be me and another guy who used to go to same college. It was like our lunch money was out of our normal giro, innit. So, like, you don't go college some days … cos, if you got no money, you not going to go college … so them sort of things happen and you start slacking behind. (Aaron)

Tammie was living with her foster brother when she was interviewed. Although he supported her ambition to return to college, she was unwilling to rely on him financially. Her experiences since being taken into care meant that she was also reluctant to ask for help from authority figures:

This is my home. This is where I live. I would have to put a lock on my door just so they could come round and check it and stuff … I think [my brother] *thinks that I should just get help with … housing benefit, but it's more difficult and it just stresses me out and I don't need it. People wanting to come round and look at your house and that, they don't trust you.*

Homelessness was generally seen as a phase that people had passed through.[1] Those who had once been homeless were diverse in their ambitions, activities and achievements. However, their periods of homelessness had often been wasted time, when other distractions and issues made it difficult to focus on education or work. Experience of homelessness tended to mean longer and more chequered transitions into stable employment, as well as disruption to further and higher education.

Problems with drugs and alcohol

Unemployment is known to be associated with increased consumption of drugs, and some researchers have suggested that the considerable effort involved in securing and financing drug supply may provide a psychological substitute for work routines (Vaillant, 1988, cited in Platt, 1995). Drug users and people with alcohol problems are particularly likely to experience other barriers to work, such as health problems, homelessness and criminal records (O'Connor *et al.*, 2001). The chaotic lifestyle often associated with drug use is also not conducive to finding or keeping employment (O'Connor *et al.*, 1999). In addition, because the areas where drug use is widespread have high rates of unemployment, those with such problems are usually operating in a highly competitive labour market (Neale, 1998).

Drug use is often connected with a particular area or social circle, which may need to be avoided if dependency is to be overcome, and employment may improve the ability to do so, both by providing an alternative source of income and by broadening the range of social contacts. Because work increases self-esteem and provides a time structure, it is often viewed as an element of treatment for addiction as well as an indicator of a successful treatment outcome. Employment is also associated with a reduction in criminal activity amongst drug users, although the level of earnings appears to be more significant than employment in itself (Platt, 1995).

Young people generally used drugs and alcohol in order to feel good. Drugs and alcohol were often taken socially, and drug use in particular was associated with being in an environment where others were using drugs

and where they were easily available. Young people who had a lot of time on their hands, because they were unemployed or truanting from school, felt that boredom was a factor which encouraged them to get involved with drugs. Peer pressure was also a factor for many young people, although, as Amber explained, the decision to use drugs or alcohol also reflected aspects of individual personalities and circumstances:

> *It was just there all the time and I was doing it quite a lot and I was a druggie doing drugs basically … it was obviously something to do with the group of people I was going round with … that's what got me started doing it but then … I had other friends who had the same group of friends who didn't do that and never had, so I don't think it's all sort of peer pressure.*

Many young people used drugs and alcohol as a form of self-medication to help them deal with or escape from problems in their lives. Daniel, for example, developed a drink problem after he couldn't cope with his father's death. Mary started to use alcohol and drugs when she was depressed about bullying at school, and Helen, who had developed a social phobia in response to personal problems, would 'get quietly drunk' as a way of coping with her isolation.

Young people with low self-esteem were vulnerable to the temptation of drug or alcohol use, as a way of making themselves feel better. At the same time, many resented being addicted to drugs or alcohol, and the fact that they were unable to change this made them feel more badly about themselves. Akash described the way that he perceived the relationship between drug use and self-esteem:

> *I had to start respecting myself because if you ain't got no self-respect you ain't going to get respect from anyone else … When you're a drug abuser or anything alcoholic you know you don't have a high self-esteem. That's why you do it. You don't believe in yourself, you know. You want to feel good all the time, you want to feel reassured.*

Some young people managed to work or study during the period when they had a drug or alcohol problem. Mark, for example, had received support from various sources to stay in work and he described some of the ways in which a working lifestyle helped him to moderate his use of drugs and alcohol. Mary also found that employment was helpful:

> *As I started working more often, I didn't really have the time to do that sort of thing, and then I got into liking my music so it was just like staying at home listening to music rather than going out on the street.*

Other young people spoke about the difficulty of holding down a steady job while they were using drugs. The main issues were incompatible lifestyles and the effect of drugs on their mental and emotional health. Amber, for instance, said that:

> *You're just involved in completely different things and you're not interacting with people on a normal basis every day, and also because it's quite anti … it just takes up your whole life … a lot of the time I wasn't getting on that well with people at work … I just wasn't making any effort to communicate with anybody else, so that has an effect.*

The cost of illegal drugs meant that young people who became addicted were at risk of being drawn into criminal activity to pay for

their habit. Becky described the culture of drug use among young people on the estate where she lived, and the culture of crime that existed alongside it. She said that it would not have been a good idea for her to take a job while she was using drugs, as she would probably have ended up stealing from her employer and getting into even more trouble.

Daniel described help he had received from a specialist 'misuse' officer working as part of the probation service. He had also received good support from his New Deal adviser, which helped him to gain employment shortly after he came out of prison. However, other young people described the negative attitude of New Deal advisers towards people who appeared to have drug or alcohol problems:

> *First couple of minutes* [the adviser] *thought I was an intelligent guy and I'd get a job, no problem … but afterwards she realised I was not getting a result, cos I'd come in here stinking of weed and stuff … I hated that and even looking at it now … it wasn't right what she did. You know, I'm not asking for sympathy. I just wanted her to treat me like a … human being. Don't talk … down to me, you know, but she did.* (Akash)

One of the more difficult aspects of staying off drugs appeared to be the social isolation that many young people experienced as a result, which could exacerbate pre-existing mental health problems. Becky, for example, had managed to stay free of illegal drugs but this had meant severing contacts with most of her former friends and she had been put on prescription drugs for depression. Martin was depressed at being unemployed and was afraid of slipping back into heroin use, which was widespread in the area where he lived.

A criminal record

Employment can be a key factor in helping offenders to change their behaviour, because it provides a different set of values and social contacts, as well as an alternative source of income. Released prisoners who find work are less likely to re-offend and many ex-offenders describe employment as part of a 'turning point' experience enabling them to move away from crime (NACRO, 1997).

However, levels of employer discrimination against ex-offenders are known to be high and, despite an increased policy emphasis on employment work since the mid-1990s, probation officers vary considerably in the extent to which they offer assistance with employment issues. Where probation officers do take an active role in providing labour market support, the likelihood of employment is doubled (Bridges, 1998).

Among the young people we interviewed, offending behaviour was linked with a number of other disadvantages, including poverty, poor school histories, a lack of opportunities for engagement in constructive activity, use of alcohol and drugs, and living in a lawless environment where young people became the victims as well as the perpetrators of crime. Many of the ex-offenders we spoke to had low self-esteem and suffered from poor mental health – problems which were also linked to their difficulties finding work.

Alan's story was typical:

> Alan: *I was just messed up at school … I didn't listen to none of the teachers and I did my own thing. So obviously I ended up not going to school quite a lot of the time … I*

think it was an inevitability actually, me getting locked up …

Interviewer: *What actually happened, what did you do then?*

Alan: *Just theft, stuff like that. Obviously, having no money and wanting to do things, it's quite hard on a teenager, and peer pressure as well and certain individuals. When I wasn't going to school I met certain people, do you know what I mean?*

Unemployment after leaving school could also leave young people in a situation where they had no money and few opportunities for productive legitimate activity, which put them at risk of being drawn into crime. Strikingly, those who became involved in crime because they were bored often had a strong work ethic. Scott, who was first arrested for shoplifting at the age of eight, told us that:

I love working, you know what I mean. Because there's an outcome at the end of it … You can graft all day and you're guaranteed something at the end of it, so it's like a bonus, innit? Yeah, I like working, me.

None of the ex-offenders we spoke to had been continuously unemployed since they had left school. Their typical work history was one of short-term agency jobs in low-skilled areas such as labouring or warehousing, interspersed with periods of unemployment. Indeed, the opportunities available for casual employment in some areas played a part in tempting young people out of school. Lee stopped going to school when he was 13 to pursue such opportunities:

Lee: *If I was at school I couldn't earn nowt, but if I was not at school I could go work for somebody …*

Interviewer: *What sorts of things did you used to do for people?*

Lee: *Window cleaning, clearing gutters, papers.*

Some young people were able to develop skills that they had learned in their criminal careers. Akash moved from being a well-known local graffiti artist to setting up his own freelance business in computer graphics, using his underground contacts to get himself started:

I grew up with all the boys who're doing pirate radio stations now … and I told them what I was doing. They said 'Yeah, yeah' cos they knew I was doing graffiti at school and they knew I was a bad boy and that sort of thing. So I said, 'I could fix you up boys. I could do a little record badge on your jackets', little designs for them, flyers you know … so that's what I started doing, how I got into it.

Many of the young people we spoke to lived on deprived and desolate estates where drugs and crime were serious problems. Several of those who had been selected for the study on the basis of their own offending behaviour described experiences of being the victims of crime. Wahid, for example, was disgusted and angry about the racial harassment that members of his family had suffered after moving to the UK from Somalia. As a young man he was not prepared to take harassment and abuse from other youths and ended up in regular fights as a result.

One or two young people provided political interpretations of the reasons why they and their peers had become involved in crime, viewing offending behaviours as a response to the injustice and exclusion that they had experienced. Liam, who lived in quite an affluent area, talked about some of the reasons why young care leavers might get drawn into crime:

> *If they're in a home or whatever and they're being looked after then, yeah, that's fair enough, but if they're out on the streets and … if you can't afford to live then that's where crime starts. … A lot of the children, when I was in Children's Homes, they were, like … robbing and that, and every now and then you'd have the police in … A lot of them were a problem, you know, but all the people there were on low income … there's other people in the society that are getting a damn sight more, and they've already got a damn sight more, and that's not fair … I'm past that stage now, so it doesn't apply to me, but, if I was put in the same situation again, I would have liked there to have been more help.*

Most of the young people we spoke to gave the impression that they had reduced or stopped their offending behaviour. Many, like Daniel, saw offending as a stage that young people go through:

> *To me, it's like from when you're like 13, up until say 20, them sort of ages, but once you turn 20, 21 you can't be doing them things any more. You've got to grow up.*

Several talked about a particular moment when they realised they needed to start making changes in their life. This decision was often associated with the development of a realisation that they had something worth working for. For example, Scott described how he had stopped offending as soon as his daughter was born. Several of the young men had found time to think more deeply about their lives during spells of imprisonment and had started some sort of training on their release. Aaron, for example, said that prison had made him 'wiser':

> *You start thinking, shoot, I never had a driving licence, and then I thought, wow, then I'll get up in the morning, I will get a driving licence. And I want to do this, I want to do that. And I think that's when I did the IT course, after that, the first one. I got my licence maybe around six months after I came out.*

Although most young people tend to grow out of offending, the stigma of having a criminal record is much harder to grow out of. All of the ex-offenders we spoke to felt that having a criminal record would discourage employers from taking them on, were they to find out about it. Some never disclosed their criminal convictions and several of those who did reported that even convictions for minor offences had formed a considerable barrier to employment. The introduction of Criminal Record Certificates as part of the new Police Act, to be implemented in 2001, is likely to increase the visibility of offenders in the recruitment process. This has the potential to increase discrimination and make it more difficult for ex-offenders to sell themselves to employers on the basis of their positive qualities (Fletcher *et al.*, 2001).

Disability and health problems

Figures from the United Kingdom Labour Force Survey (LFS), undertaken in the summer of

2000, show that the economic activity rate for disabled people was around 52 per cent, compared with 86 per cent for non-disabled people. The unemployment rate for disabled people was approximately twice that of non-disabled people. People who reported mental health problems had the lowest rates of economic activity, at around 22 per cent, followed by those with learning difficulties (slightly more than a third of men and slightly less than a quarter of women with learning difficulties were economically active). In contrast, those who reported having skin conditions or allergies, diabetes, hearing problems and breathing problems all had economic activity rates of around 70 to 80 per cent (Twomey, 2001).

People who become disabled while in work often lose their employment; survey evidence shows that fewer than one in five employers suggest anything that could facilitate a return to work (Erens and Ghate, 1993; James *et al.*, 1997). Disabled people who are in work are disproportionately likely to be in manual occupations and have lower hourly earnings even after taking account of differences in age, education and occupation. This earnings gap has grown substantially since the mid-1980s (Burchardt, 2000).

Nineteen out of the 49 young people interviewed for the JRF study had said they had a disability or long-term health problem that affected work. The depth interviews showed that, of all the disadvantages used to select respondents, disability was the most varied in its consequences for labour market experience. All of the young disabled people we interviewed were economically active. However, they had experienced a broad range of health problems and impairments, and had different kinds of need for employment support.

Five of the young people we interviewed reported that they had dyslexia, which some of them defined as a disability affecting work. Their employment support needs are described in the next section, which looks at the effects of language and literacy difficulties. Two had other learning difficulties, three had sight or hearing impairments, three had asthma and one had epilepsy. Three young people referred to long-standing mental health problems, two were concerned about their size and one had had to leave an education course because of glandular fever.

The effects of conditions such as asthma and epilepsy on labour market experience varied according to the severity of the condition. Daniel's epilepsy was mild – he had only ever had one or two fits – but it still placed limitations on the kinds of work that were safe for him to do. He was working in an assembly job at the time of his interview and said that he had to avoid working with machinery.

Asthma also limited the kinds of jobs which young people could do and it often disrupted the education of young people who suffered from severe attacks. Martin described how his school had failed to pick up on his truancy for an extended period, because they assumed his poor attendance was the result of asthma:

> *I did have asthma then, so for me to be off for long periods of time, the school thought it normal. But after six months they rang my mum and said 'Is he all right, because he has been off an awful long time?' My mum says 'What are you on about – he has been going every day … for six months.'*

Julie also missed school regularly as a result of asthma-related illness and she left altogether at the age of 12 years. She was also dyslexic and her mother was disabled. Julie described how she was bullied at school and was 'petrified all the time of going in'. Bullying was a common reason for poor attendance at school and young people with any kind of impairment or physical difference were particularly vulnerable to bullying. Mary, for example, also left school early after being bullied because she was overweight.

Several young people described how a lack of appropriate support for their impairments or health problems had affected their education, with knock-on effects on their employment prospects later on. Fatima, for example, felt that a lack of support for her visual impairment had prevented her from doing well in school:

> *If* [the teacher] *would be understanding, if they really took notice then they would have made me sit at the front all the time, but they never took any notice and I had to sit at the back and when they used to see my book, you know 'Oh, what have you wrote down?' and all these awful things and she go 'Why didn't you do anything? Look – all the class did properly' and, you know, they just kept forgetting, and that was why.*

Although Fatima, like many of the disabled young people we spoke to, had a typical work history characterised by periods of temporary work interspersed with unemployment, three out of the four young people who had never worked since leaving school were disabled. Richard, for example, had attended a mainstream school and had later studied at a specialist residential college for blind people, where he had managed to achieve an NVQ Level 2 in horticulture. Despite his ability and qualifications, he had been unemployed for six years. He was depressed and angry at the lack of opportunities for him to work and his frustration became apparent when the interviewer asked about the kinds of options he had considered:

> *Well, believe me, I've looked at me options. You don't spend six years off work and not think about how you could get back into work, and into courses. I have tried places. I've tried going back at colleges. I have tried to work. But nowt seems to happen.*

Sandeep, at the age of 25, was also in the position where he had never worked. He had attended a special school for deaf people, which he had enjoyed, and he had spent most of the eight years since he had left school attending various college courses, in motor mechanics, spreadsheets and accounting, and building. At the time of his interview, he was attending college part-time, studying computing, maths and British Sign Language (BSL). Sandeep's adviser was attempting to persuade him, after eight years on courses, to attend a residential course designed especially for deaf people. Sandeep was reluctant to go, as the college was in a different area of the country, which he perceived to be racist.

Sandeep had applied for a lot of jobs, without any success. He had recently attended an interview for a job as a car park attendant, which he described as 'difficult'. It was hard for the employer to understand his speech and the employer also spoke too quickly for him to understand. Although he was learning BSL and used this to communicate with his friends, there was no sign language interpreter available at the job centre, and this kind of help had not

been made available to him when he went to job interviews.

Dana had learning difficulties and had attended a special needs school. She had been on two work experience placements in the six years since she left school but had no actual paid employment. Her most recent New Deal placement had involved work in a care home. It was defined as a full-time education and training option but Dana appeared to have had little actual training. The lack of any follow-up support to build on the placement was particularly disappointing as, despite its limitations, the experience had meant a lot to Dana. She felt that going out to work every day for six weeks had made her more confident and happy in herself, and she would have liked to continue building up the experience necessary to gain actual paid employment.

Dana felt that Employment Service advisers and the organisation providing her New Deal placement had not really understood the kinds of help that she and others with learning difficulties needed. When asked to describe some of the main things that made it difficult for young people to find work, she replied:

> *It's like, when you've got special needs like me. Because they don't understand the back up that we need, and the encouragement that we need. Which makes it more difficult for us than it would for any normal person.*

She also criticised the lack of communication with her personal adviser:

> *The communication simply ain't there. Cos, if I could go and see my adviser and say to her 'I'd like to try this … I'd like to try that.' But it doesn't work like that.*

The survey questions on mental health mainly identified young people who were suffering from anxiety and depression. Sometimes, these feelings were associated with difficult life experiences, such as bereavement and other forms of loss. Often, they were associated with unemployment, with its experiences of poverty, frustration and lack of opportunity. Depression and low self-esteem in combination could lead to apathy and reduced effort in looking for work.

A few young people described how mental health problems had made it impossible for them to work at a particular time. Glen, for example, was still suffering from a severe social phobia after experiencing an armed assault. He had previously been in full-time factory employment but was unable to work at the time of his interview. Glen had loved work and found that the inactivity and loneliness of unemployment exacerbated his mental health problems:

> *Yeah, cos, if I'm not working, I'm depressed as well. I don't want to do nothing. I'm bored and, when I'm bored, there's more chance of the flashbacks coming back.*

He had not felt able to discuss his experiences with the Employment Service advisers. Eventually, he had been to see his doctor, who referred him to counselling services.

Carl's life had been made difficult by family problems, dyslexia and mental health problems. Although he had a record of warehouse employment in agency jobs, he was finding it difficult to get jobs at the time we interviewed him after an accident at work, and it was clear that his mental health problems made it difficult for him to sustain employment. Like Glen, he

described how he became more depressed when unemployed.

Language and literacy problems

Literacy and numeracy difficulties are common among unemployed young people and research suggests that they are associated with many different kinds of disadvantage, including disengagement from school and offending (NACRO, 1997).

Young people who come to the UK as refugees are particularly likely to have language problems. Some are academically able and require support to facilitate their progress in higher education or professional careers. At the other end of the spectrum, some are not literate in their first language and cannot be expected to become literate in English without a great deal of support.

White New Deal entrants were as likely as those from ethnic minorities to say that they had experienced problems with English language or literacy, but the depth interviews showed that the roots of literacy and numeracy difficulties tended to be different for white and minority ethnic young people. Minority ethnic young people who mentioned such problems tended to speak English as a second language and several of them had moved to the UK as teenagers, speaking no English when they arrived. For white young people, literacy and numeracy problems were most frequently associated with poor school experiences and dyslexia.

The relationship between literacy and numeracy problems and problems at school was complex. Language and literacy problems could be the result of disrupted or incomplete schooling, but they could also play a part in causing difficult educational experiences. For example, having been competent and confident learners in their own countries, young people who moved to the UK speaking little English often found themselves defined as problem learners. Although some additional support was often provided at school, this was generally insufficient to help young people achieve good qualifications. Saeeda, whose long-term ambition was to study medicine, explained how she had left school early because there was no point in trying to keep up. She had subsequently studied at college and was hoping to do an access to higher education course. However, college was not an easy option for young people struggling with the English language, as the ratio of students to lecturers tended to be high. Zabir described how he had struggled in the face of this lack of support:

> *You don't tend to get the sufficient assistance from the lecturers because they tend to be really busy and they don't give you much care. Even, I believe, that if somebody can't speak English and goes to college, it is hard for* [the lecturers] *to find out … because they never … talk on a personal basis. So they never knew, you know, either I knew the English or I didn't in the last three years … I was only one guy and I was really shy to express my feelings and that's when I struggle.*

Young people with dyslexia needed specific kinds of help to succeed at school, but many described how their learning difficulties were mistaken for disruptiveness. When dyslexia was eventually diagnosed, young people were often required to move schools in order to obtain more specialist help, an experience that they found difficult to cope with. Steve had been sent to a special school when he was 13, but stayed

for only three months because he found it to be too far from his home. He was not offered alternative educational arrangements.

Like many other dyslexic young people, John had found school work extremely difficult. Teachers, who labelled him as disruptive, initially dismissed his problems and when they were eventually recognised he was forced to move schools. Although he was offered a more appropriate type of education at this stage, mixing school lessons with vocational courses at college, John felt that he could have overcome his reading and writing problems if they had been diagnosed earlier. As it was, he was still unable to read and write and this made it very difficult for him to find employment.

Even when dyslexic young people had managed to achieve some qualifications from their secondary schooling, they still tended to describe the experience as stressful. In many cases, this had long-term implications for their self-confidence and mental health. Melanie's dyslexia had been diagnosed relatively early, and she had managed to complete school and to pass seven GCSEs. However, she described her time at school as 'horrible' and she contrasted the way that different teachers had handled her needs:

> *Some teachers … they handled it, they got through to me. But others, they just thought that pushing and pushing and pushing would work, but it didn't. I was separated from the group quite often – that made me feel like an outcast.*

Like Zabir, whose difficulties were related to English not being his first language, Melanie felt that she would have benefited from concentrating on fewer subjects at school. Lack of support when taking exams was generally a problem for dyslexic young people who got as far as exam entry. John described a typical experience:

> *We did ask, like, even with my GCSEs and that, they did ask if I could do it by tape, and they said no. So I walked out of one of my exams, and I didn't go to the others, cos the examiner just put a piece of paper in front of me and said 'Do it'. And I just walked out.*

Dyslexia continued to be a problem for young people who progressed into further and higher education. Melanie described how she had dropped out of a course to become a PE teacher because she found the academic content too difficult. She had subsequently left a course at art college as a result of family problems.

Many young people who had difficulties with reading and writing tended to prefer work that would play to their non-academic abilities. The young white men with such problems were most interested in manual work, practical trades and jobs that took them out and about. The women were interested in careers that would use their creative and personal skills.

In contrast, many of the minority ethnic young people who had experienced problems developing facility in the English language were looking for medium or higher level jobs which demanded quite high levels of literacy. Several felt frustrated by the lack of encouragement for them to pursue such careers, as Zabir, who was currently studying law, described:

> *They said I cannot be a lawyer … This is my aspirations and my family's aspirations to become a lawyer and they just put me off in the first place. They said you came late, it is going to be too unrealistic for you. I remember my form tutor saying that and … a lot of my school mates … Better, you know, I do packing work or go factory.*

Young people with dyslexia tended to view literacy difficulties as a key factor responsible for their disadvantage in the labour market. Steve, who also had a criminal record, introduced himself in the following way:

> *My name's Steve. I'm not very good at reading and writing and all that, and I want a job, but that's stopping me from getting one.*

Reading and writing difficulties were less easy to disguise than a criminal record. The experience of young people with severe literacy and numeracy difficulties paralleled that of young disabled people who found that employers were unwilling to adapt jobs to suit their needs. Employers were perceived as stereotyping people with literacy problems and as understanding little about dyslexia. When asked whether it would be useful to have more support explaining her needs to employers, Melanie replied:

> *I don't see how it could help much with being dyslexic. I mean, unfortunately people still have the opinion, especially older people, that if you're dyslexic you're just thick.*

Reading and writing problems caused difficulty throughout the job-search process, from reading adverts, to filling out application forms and attending interviews. John described his repeated experiences of rejection for jobs:

> *I've got loads of experience … They don't offer me things, I think, because I can't read and write. And they're 'You can't do this, you can't do that, we're going to see the next applicant that can read and write' … It's filling out application forms. Or, even if you go to an agency now, you have to do a test, you have to sit down and do a test.*

Young people with literacy problems valued personal adviser support, particularly where advisers had allowed them more time, or given them one-to-one help with reading and writing tasks. On the other hand, there was some dissatisfaction with the format and content of basic skills courses. Steve, for example, found that his New Deal education option in basic skills development involved too much reading and writing. He felt that he would have coped better if the course had alternated this with more practical hands-on activity:

> *You had to do reading and writing for 26 weeks, and then you could go on to another option. But it got boring doing the same thing over and over again. If I'd have had two things I would have liked it, cos I used to do woodwork before as well … and I got really into it. And they did it there, but I only done it for a day, then they put me on to reading and writing.*

However, vocational courses could have limited benefits where employers were not prepared to take young people who could not read and write. John had obtained his fork-lift licence through New Deal but had no success in finding a job in this area, because of the requirement to follow written instructions and make written reports. Tasneem had done sewing and packing jobs, and was looking for any kind of manual work. She resented being sent on a one-year basic skills course as part of New Deal. Zabir, who was studying to become a lawyer, had also been sent on such a course. He described this as completely inappropriate for his needs, saying that it had wasted his time and damaged his mental health.

3 Providing support – an organisational perspective

Workers from organisations providing employment support to disadvantaged young people emphasised the importance of taking an individualised approach. The main themes arising from their interviews concerned:

- ways of engaging disadvantaged young people
- the importance of timing and continued support
- setting goals
- preparing young people for work by developing confidence, motivation and discipline
- overcoming barriers to employment.

Engaging disadvantaged young people

Negative earlier experiences of authority can lead disadvantaged young people to become wary of official agencies, and help that is provided within a framework of conditions and sanctions may be particularly difficult for them to access. They may be reluctant to use services unless they are provided in familiar environments that are perceived as safe. The support workers drew attention to the difficulty of engaging with such young people. One worker from an organisation providing services to people with substance dependency problems described the feelings of fear and shame that sometimes made the first contact particularly difficult:

> *I think it takes a lot of courage for someone to cross our threshold … One woman, she stood outside for six weeks and looked across the road to see who came in and out our front door, before she came in herself. And that's an awful long time to keep turning up and then just watching to see if it's safe to come in.*

Most of the support workers emphasised their organisations' commitment to voluntary participation. Many felt that young people were resistant to compulsion and would find ways of avoiding participation in mandatory programmes. They contrasted their way of operating with that of New Deal, where sanctions are meted out for non-compliance. There was a strong feeling that their services would only be effective where participants were themselves motivated to succeed, as a worker providing careers guidance described:

> *It's obviously this thing about not forcing them to go. We can't. We have no powers to and we would never do that anyway. Because, at the end of the day, if they are not wanting to make a move towards engaging with those things, and if there's not commitment on their part, there's no way that that would succeed. They obviously have to be motivated … And, if they have that … there will be something I can do to support them.*

However, organisations hoping to reach disadvantaged young people could not simply sit and wait for their clients to come to them. A worker providing support to homeless young people described the effort involved in attempting to make contact with young people who were afraid of making the first step themselves:

> *It's a matter of chasing them – mobile phones, excuses and all that sort of thing. And I think the thing that is holding a lot of these youngsters*

back – why they don't want to be jump started into something – is because they're so frightened of failure they're frightened to do anything.

Providing a range of services that were likely to be attractive to different individuals was one way that organisations tried to encourage access. Some ran outreach and drop-in services, or provided taster sessions of work experience or training. Some had open groups so that people could attend only when they felt able, while others used closed groups to build trust and overcome feelings of isolation and shame.

The importance of timing

Labour market policy for disadvantaged groups often shifts between a focus on improving employability and the idea of 'work first'. Deferring action on employment incurs the risk of missing important windows of opportunity. On the other hand, failed attempts at employment can be disastrous for people who are already lacking in confidence and have many previous experiences of rejection or failure. Qualitative research on the New Deal for Young People has shown that young people with longstanding personal issues tend to cope more successfully than those who have a crisis (such as illness, pregnancy or bereavement) during their time on New Deal (O'Connor *et al.*, 2000).

The support workers we interviewed described how some young people were so preoccupied with other aspects of their lives that there was little scope for engagement around issues of employment. Sometimes people only started to tackle longstanding issues after reaching some kind of turning point, triggered perhaps by having children, a bereavement, or a spell in prison. Employment had an important role to play in encouraging people to maintain progress in their personal development. As well as providing an income, it was seen as an important source of social contacts and time structure. A worker supporting drug users and ex-offenders described the importance of finding employment quickly:

Employers have said we can't take you for a couple of weeks because of contracts or whatever, and you can just see the fear in their face. 'What am I gonna do for a fortnight? I know I'm going to maybe go back on drugs.'

An important factor in encouraging disadvantaged young people to access employment support services voluntarily was being able to provide these services as and when they were needed. A worker from a homelessness organisation described the importance of being able to offer a service immediately for young people in difficult circumstances:

Because of the nature of homelessness, we sort of have to grab people as and when … They can come any time during the week for an initial assessment … then they could start the following Monday. So, that way, we keep their interest. Rather than say 'Start three weeks down the line', because I know from experience that they won't show.

Contrasts were drawn between the accessibility of services that these organisations tried to provide and the various eligibility criteria that restricted access to mainstream government programmes. One worker, supporting unemployed drug users,

commented that some young people appeared to have been repeatedly missed by previous initiatives, so that their problems had become entrenched:

> *I am seeing the same people with the same problems time and time again, and I am particularly seeing young people, 16 and 17 year olds, who are in the hardship part of their claims … becoming 18 years old in New Deal and turning 25 and still being long-term unemployed.*

Although young people in particularly difficult circumstances are allowed to enter New Deal early,[1] support workers felt that this provision was under-used, and most of the young people did not seem aware of it. One worker dealing with care leavers described how she accompanied them to New Deal interviews, to make it clear that they did not need to meet the six-month eligibility criterion.

Flexible access according to individual needs was a principle applying not only to the point of initial engagement but also to the frequency and length of contact. Support workers described how interaction with clients might need to be particularly intense at times of stress, such as the first few weeks of employment. Young people who had been in care were particularly in need of the kind of informal support that parents would normally provide:

> *I shall be monitoring these young people if they have any difficulty in the workplace … to let them know, you know 'I'm still wondering how you are and how you're getting on.' Because, let's face it, a lot of these young people do not have contact with their natural parents … and they're not in a position that at the end of the school or working day they can go home and sit around the dining table and talk about their experiences and talk about new friends and what they did today. A lot of them, when they close that door, that's it.*

Most organisations found it difficult to continue supporting young people who had started work, as they were constrained by funding arrangements linked solely to the achievement of job outcomes. Where organisations were able to offer in-work support, there were obvious benefits in preventing the breakdown of employment.

Organisations pointed out that dealing with long-term problems was often a long-term process, not one that could easily be achieved within the short timescales of some forms of employment support. As well as making efforts to stay in touch with young people while they were looking for work, many support workers felt that it was important to offer the opportunity for people to return if they needed help in future. When young people were moving between different services, perhaps because of an age or accommodation change, or coming to the end of a course, a job or a period of custody, they could easily lose touch with support providers and progress made in training, education and employment could be lost. A worker providing support to young people from ethnic minorities explained:

> *When people say they've found a job and we can take them off the books we always say to them they can come back at any time, to get another job or about any work problems. The door is always open for them. We can help them if they feel they're being picked on or if they are discriminated against.*

Providing support for job moves is likely to be an important element in making sure that disadvantaged young people achieve long-term success in the labour market, rather than remaining trapped in entry-level jobs, but only a minority of the organisations we visited were able to maintain this sort of long-term involvement with clients.

Setting goals

The research literature suggests that many young people facing multiple disadvantages in the labour market have unrealistic expectations of the type of job and the level of wages that they can expect to obtain (Spilsbury and Cummins, 1997; O'Connor *et al.*, 1999). Some of the support workers also made this point. Others described how some disadvantaged clients under-estimated their abilities. Several described ways that they worked with young people individually to discuss the appropriateness of their expectations and to develop longer-term goals:

> *Our role is obviously to get to know that person, quite in-depth knowledge about who that person is and where they want to go … and to romanticise it slightly. To say that, you know, we as human beings tend to dream quite a lot. Well, I do and you probably do too. You look at yourself in the mirror and you go 'If only' … we encourage people with disabilities to do that. Which is a bit of a challenge, because their expectations generally when they walk through the door are fairly low.*

Some organisations distinguished between short-term, medium-term and long-term goals, and emphasised the importance of revisiting the goal-setting process as the people they were working with increased their confidence and skills.

Preparing young people for work

Although some employers specify a minimum level of qualifications and skills, many place more emphasis on general job readiness. Many of the disadvantaged young people these organisations worked with were far from job-ready when they first began using their services. Their lives were often chaotic and many had little confidence in their own ability to make progress in the labour market. Although mainstream labour market programmes tend to focus on the achievement of qualifications, vocational skills and work experience, the support workers we interviewed spoke mainly about earlier stages of preparation for work, with the emphasis on developing discipline, confidence and motivation. However, pressures to generate employment outcomes in order to meet targets set by funders meant that organisations were not always able to provide these services to more than a minority of their users. Some had been obliged to change their priorities over time in response to such pressures, even where they had originally planned to work more flexibly with the most disadvantaged.

Although the organisations were reluctant to operate in an environment where young people were compelled to use their services, they recognised the importance of rules and sanctions once young people were engaged. These were seen as an important way of providing structure and stability, and they also provided a model for the types of environment

young people were likely to encounter in the workplace. A support worker for care leavers described the importance of creating an environment that was comfortable for young people, but not too informal:

> *There needs to be some sort of mixture and balance, so young people don't think that, when they walk into an education environment, for example, or an employment environment, they can sit down and expect to be sitting on sofas with their legs up. It's not like that. There's a danger with being too lenient with young people, which then works to their disadvantage sometimes.*

The organisations were primarily concerned with building the young people's confidence and belief that they could succeed in a working environment, which might be totally alien to some of them. An adviser working with drug users and ex-offenders felt that lack of confidence was a fundamental reason why disadvantaged young people tended to drop out of employment and education:

> *They all have never worked and then they've got into the drug culture. I think there might be a thread running through that. They don't have fundamental belief in themselves. They're not willing to take a risk to do something and, when it then gets a bit hot, they back off or go off sick, and they won't see it through. They won't. They've not got that push.*

Providing opportunities to achieve success was seen as an important way of building the confidence of disadvantaged young people. Some organisations provided outward-bound courses. Others were able to provide feedback on interviews. Some had small ceremonies and issued certificates to show that people had successfully completed a course, even where it did not result in a recognised qualification. Others helped people to prepare a portfolio that demonstrated their progress. Organisations made a strong case for funding to recognise 'distance travelled', rather than simply job outcomes, and some were in the process of developing appropriate measurement systems.

The staff of some organisations described how disadvantaged young people benefited from working alongside others with similar problems. A worker supporting disabled people and those with mental health problems described the progress that some had made in group work:

> *People who would not say a word at the beginning have blossomed by the end. I can hear them laughing, and you can just see the difference between them all, caring for one another. And they get a great sense from finding out that people out there have the same problems ... I think that's a great confidence builder … to help them overcome what they see as the difficulties getting back to work.*

A support worker from another disability organisation described how one person's success in finding employment could boost the confidence of others in a group:

> *When Joe got his part-time job at the stables, the whole of the group, it totally altered their attitude … They said 'Oh, I never thought any of us was going to get a job.' It pulled everybody … pulled them up, didn't it? You could see it in their bodies.*

Although achievements were celebrated, organisations also emphasised the importance of helping people to feel comfortable with

failing sometimes, of learning how to pick themselves up and try again, rather than feeling defeated by setbacks.

Overcoming barriers

The development of resilience was particularly important for multiply disadvantaged young people, operating within a labour market that puts up many barriers to their employment. The two main types of barriers that concerned support workers were benefit traps and employer attitudes.

Problems with social security benefits were mentioned by most organisations. The most commonly cited was that of the high rate of benefit relative to the wage people could expect to command, especially for disabled people, and for those with high housing costs (as in supported housing or hostel settings). Benefit traps were particularly likely where local wage rates were low, and where the whole family was on benefit. While Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Persons Tax Credit were seen to have made a difference for those eligible, they did not resolve the housing costs issue and many organisations were working with single people who were not eligible for either of these benefits.

Some organisations working with disabled people and those with mental health problems expressed the need for more flexibility in the benefits system, so that people could work for a few hours a week, either initially or over the longer term.

Discrimination by employers was mentioned as a barrier by organisations working with refugees and members of minority ethnic groups, people with a physical or mental impairment, homeless people and ex-offenders. Bearing in mind the number of people eligible for New Deal who fall into one or more of these groups, the potential scale of such discrimination is striking. Perhaps even more significant than outright discrimination were negative attitudes on the part of employers, which were difficult to challenge because they were usually not made explicit. One adviser from the South East described the problem of covert racism:

> *You are fighting a battle against employers … they don't say it, they all wave the banner of equal opps and, you know, non-racism, but I've been down and I've got my suspicions.*

Educating employers about the types of issues that might be raised by employing someone from a disadvantaged group emerged as a key theme. For instance, workers from organisations working with refugees and people with mental health problems commented on the damage done by sensationalist media coverage, and the negative effect this had on employers' attitudes. One organisation held annual events on disability and learning disability issues, which were very popular with local employers.

Organisations varied in the extent to which they saw it as part of their role to directly challenge discriminatory employers. They typically avoided sending candidates to organisations known to have negative attitudes. The representative of a disability organisation explained the reasoning behind this approach:

> *You get … a range of different reactions from callers, from excuses to downright discrimination, to people who are excellent and have got really good practice. And our reaction to that is you*

don't want to work for somebody who's going to discriminate against you anyway, so don't bother applying.

A worker from another disability organisation explained how they took a more proactive approach to changing employers' attitudes:

It is very much a selling job. A lot of it's cold calling, just going into employers. It's trying to persuade them. If they don't want to work with somebody with a disability for whatever reason, you've got to try and overcome those objections, try and find out what it is that's making them not want to go ahead.

Young people with criminal records or health problems faced the issue of whether to disclose these to employers. Disclosure could prejudice their chances of gaining access to employment, but failure to disclose problems could lead to the loss of a job if these problems were subsequently discovered by the employer. Although many young people told us they preferred not to disclose such issues, most organisations favoured strategies of positive disclosure. Sometimes, this was so that the employee would receive appropriate support in the workplace. A few organisations working with disabled people had been able to persuade employers to modify elements of a job to make it suitable for a particular candidate.

Organisations working closely with employers also felt it necessary to be open about such issues in order to protect their own reputations. Advisers from these organisations felt a moral obligation to pass on information relating to convictions that were not spent, or to current drug and alcohol problems. More pragmatically, they realised that failure to do so would prejudice access to further vacancies. Some organisations effectively acted as a safety net by taking on the employment relationship in an agency framework, or by undertaking to deal with all the personal issues that a new recruit might bring to their post.

One worker who dealt with ex-offenders emphasised the importance of checking whether convictions were spent and, where this was the case, explaining to individuals that they did not have to disclose these to employers:

Quite often … I'll speak to their probation officer and find out when the conviction is spent, and try to repackage them and advise them that they don't have to tell people.

'Packaging' the disadvantaged job seeker was an important service that related to presentation of their positive skills and qualities as well as their disadvantages. Organisations involved in a brokerage role with employers commented on the importance of selling candidates in a positive way, as an asset to the employer, rather than trying to appeal to the employer's social conscience:

We don't want employers employing people because it's a nice thing to do. It might be, but that shouldn't be the primary reason. The primary reason to employ anybody is to add value to your business, isn't it … you employ people because you've got a role that they can fulfil. Our aim is to ensure that employers think about it in the same way.

Where young people had been given a chance by employers, they generally valued this opportunity highly, and were keen to show that they were loyal and committed employees.

4 Using employment support – views of young people

All of the young people we interviewed had been invited to enter New Deal at some stage, and support received from this programme had a high profile in their interviews. They were also asked to describe their feelings about the usefulness of various different types of support, including:

- personal adviser services
- support groups
- job-search coaching
- work trials
- training opportunities
- employment advocacy.

Experiences of New Deal

Young people who enter New Deal start with a Gateway period, designed to last for up to four months, during which they work with a personal adviser to improve their employability and seek unsubsidised jobs. Those still on the programme after four months may enter one of four main options: subsidised employment, full-time education and training, work for the voluntary sector, or work with the Environment Task Force. Most options last for around six months, except full-time education and training, which can last for up to a year. Those who have not found work on completing the option are offered further 'Follow Through' support from the personal adviser.

The survey evaluation of New Deal found that, in general, the subsidised employment option was most effective at helping young people into jobs. Young people from ethnic minorities tended to do particularly well on the employment option, but they were under-represented on it. In general, however, the employment option did not appear to help multiply disadvantaged participants to improve their chances of entering work. The evaluation research found that the education option was generally the most helpful in boosting the relative performance of young people with multiple disadvantages (Bonjour *et al.*, 2001, Executive Summary).

Among the disadvantaged young people interviewed for this study, only two had taken part in the employment option, four did the Environment Task Force option and six did the voluntary sector option. Sixteen took part in the education option and 21 left New Deal without taking part in any option.

Nine of the young people who never entered a New Deal option left the programme fairly quickly, within the first few months. Five of them had moved into jobs, but only one felt that help received from New Deal had been a major factor in this. The others had returned to inactivity or unemployment.

Twelve other young people stayed on New Deal for relatively long periods of five months or more, without entering an option. There appeared to be various reasons for this. Some had eventually found jobs or education courses. Another group, who were all unemployed at the time of our interview, generally felt discouraged, lacked confidence in their chances of finding a job or a job that would appeal to them, and described themselves as lazy about finding work. They tended to feel that New

Deal advisers had been less supportive than they could have been. Some had initially been enthusiastic about New Deal and other training possibilities but had lost this enthusiasm when their expectations were not met. A third group had problems that made it particularly difficult for them to start work or further education, including drug use, mental health problems, housing difficulties and problems finding childcare.

Although 16 young people had been on the education option, only five said that their courses had been helpful in the long run. Four had dropped out of courses because of pregnancy or family problems. Four others felt they had been forced into doing courses that were inappropriate for their needs. Two had been on work-based training placements but were disappointed when these were not followed by offers of employment or further help.

Feelings of being exploited or let down were common among young people who had completed work-based placements with no tangible reward at the end, whether these were labelled as education, employment, Environment Task Force or voluntary sector options. Some young people felt that employers were abusing the system. Others were left questioning what they had done wrong. Jack, for example, still dreamed of obtaining a job with the employer who had provided his Environment Task Force placement:

> *I mean, that's what I was told when I started … there's a job guaranteed at the end of it. But, when I got to the end of it, there wasn't. I mean, I'm a good timekeeper, good working together, and all this lot, but whether that comes into it, I don't know. I just couldn't understand why I just did not get the job.*

Such experiences of rejection could be particularly damaging for disadvantaged young people, whose confidence was often already low.

Young people's overall assessments of New Deal were closely related to their own experiences and outcomes. At its best, New Deal embodied many of the elements that support workers from specialist organisations described as important for young people with multiple disadvantages. Daniel, for example, described the friendliness of New Deal staff, their interest in him as an individual and the way that they would put themselves out to be helpful:

> [The New Deal advisers] *have been a lot more interested in me as a person, more willing to give advice. Like, the people before, they didn't used to speak to you when you went to sign on. When you went to sign on they were meant to check if you'd been looking for work. Before I were on New Deal they didn't even check. They just used to sign. Most of them didn't even speak to you but on New Deal it's 'Oh, how's your job search going? We've got some jobs here on the computer. Are you interested in doing this?' They push you into other areas of work and that helps you know, helps a lot … The woman used to phone me with jobs.*

Some young people also praised New Deal for encouraging them to be more active in their search for work:

> *Sure, the New Deal thing, that were good cos … if, like, you wanted dole, you had to do stuff for your money. So ... cos I think, if people get used to sitting around … they are going to want an easy life. You have actually got to work … and showing them that they have got to work and giving them good rewards, I reckon that's what will make them, do you know what I mean?* (Alan)

However, New Deal was also seen by some young people as unfriendly, inflexible and unhelpful, with advisers having little time to provide one-to-one help. Kendra, for example, who was feeling emotionally vulnerable after experiencing several bereavements, described the problems she had experienced in engaging with New Deal advisers:

> *Two weeks ago, I said to him 'When am I going to be able to go back on my New Deal* [course]*?' Typed in my National Insurance number, 'Oh, March. See you later.' I said 'Oh, OK.' Then I just walked away. If he ain't gonna show me no response, then why should I? I don't like the advisers. Wish we can pick our own advisers. But we can't do that can we?*

Leroy attributed the lack of individual attention he received from New Deal advisers to the volume of clients that they were trying to deal with:

> *I thought New Deal was good, but I don't think the one-to-one help has been that good. I think a lot of it is left to you to ask questions, but at the same time I think the ratio should be balanced, you know. I think I should be enthusiastic but so should my New Deal adviser. But I think that could be … the New Deal adviser's got so many people coming in maybe they don't really feel that cared to really put all their time into every single person that comes.*

Personal adviser services

The role of the personal adviser has been highlighted as one of the most innovative and valuable features of New Deal (Legard and Ritchie, 1999; O'Connor *et al.*, 2000), and the accounts of the young people we interviewed supported this. Most of them thought that it would be helpful to have the support of a single personal adviser, although some young people who had experienced poor relationships with particular advisers felt that this might limit the help they could obtain.

Avoiding repetition of their personal details was important for young people with multiple disadvantages, whose stories were often long, complicated, sensitive and difficult to discuss. Mary, like others, valued the privacy of just talking to one adviser:

> *If you only tell one person about it, then you know it's definitely going to be private and confidential, and no one else's interfering or anything, wanting to know that and that. That one person's going to know half your life at the end of the day. I think it's a good thing. Yeah, I'd rather only talk to one person.*

The support of a sympathetic personal adviser could be particularly helpful for young people who were long-term unemployed and felt that job centre staff had a low opinion of them:

> *It does help to have one person, you know, because at least then they get to know you a little bit week by week, rather than, you know, just talking to a complete stranger …* [signing on] *is something I dread. I hate going down there. I hate having to speak to them. I hate having to answer them, you know.* (Liam)

Other young people appreciated the fact that their New Deal advisers had 'always been there' when they needed to talk to them, and the way that they had taken a flexible approach to sorting out problems.

Some young people felt that personal advisers could take a more individualised approach to the provision of guidance. Jermaine described the type of service that he would like to see:

> *If he was going the way to find these specific jobs that people were interested in and also which people have been designed to do … If he were to go away and look for a job that would fit them but was also what they wanted as well. I think that could work.*

Several young people expressed their need for someone who could help to motivate them and provide focus for their job search. One or two young people said that it would have been helpful to have personal adviser support available for problems that occurred in work.

Disadvantaged young people repeatedly emphasised the importance of having an adviser who was caring and understanding, and some suggested that unemployed people themselves should be trained as advisers. Several of those who had negative experiences of the Employment Service felt that other agencies would be better placed to provide them with personalised support. Sometimes, this was because they were seen as neutral, without responsibility for checking benefit eligibility. Sometimes, specialists in particular areas, such as the employment of offenders, were seen as most helpful. Although Employment Service advisers can make referrals to other agencies, and some of the young people we interviewed had been referred in this way, most did not appear to be aware of this possibility. A number of young people would have liked a more wide-ranging personal advisory service that would deal in an integrated way with the various problems that made it difficult for them to work, including childcare, problems in completing benefit forms and debt.

Support groups

Support groups were particularly beneficial where they helped people connect with others who had similar experiences. Many young people who felt depressed and isolated were keen to gain support from others who really understood what they were going through, although the initial experience was not always easy:

> *Some people tend to be shy and like just don't want to be in that group. I were a bit like that at first but we've all got similar problems, like the unemployment thing, so why not speak out?* (Mary)

Barry, who came across as depressed and disaffected, said that he would like to find a group of people who were 'just the same as me, and people on probation'. Steve, who had a combination of literacy problems, poor mental health and a criminal record, said that he would like to attend a support group every day, if it was local. Kendra and Melanie both described how support groups had helped them to develop understanding from other people's perspectives, as well as providing a group of people who were understanding of them.

While some young people saw support groups as a way of helping with difficult personal experiences, others were most interested in groups that were focused around the process of looking for work. Work-focused support groups were seen as a useful way of

building confidence and overcoming the isolation that was sometimes a feature of unemployment. Ruksana described how unemployed friends had served as a kind of informal support group when she had been looking for jobs. Like a number of other young people, she also saw the support group as a potential source of information about job vacancies.

Jermaine and Leroy, who were both of Caribbean origin, described how support groups could help people not only to share but also to overcome negative experiences that had previously blocked their progress. Leroy himself had taken the initiative of becoming a mentor and was providing support to a young man who was in prison.

However, some young people were put off by the stigma attached to support groups and saw them as only for people with 'severe problems'. Many said that they had difficulty relating to strangers in a group situation, and issues of confidentiality were a problem where sensitive subjects were being discussed. Young people who could draw on understanding family members and friends for support sometimes felt that they had no need for a more formal support group. It was quite common for disadvantaged young people to feel that they didn't want other people 'knowing their business', and one or two felt ashamed to discuss their problems in front of a wider group:

> *You don't really want to tell everybody that you ain't got no qualifications. You don't want to tell everybody that you've been out of work for so long, you know. So, it's like, even though people are in the same situation as you and people probably won't criticise you, it's better one to one.* (Paula)

Some felt that they would end up taking on other people's problems in addition to their own, others that it would be depressing to have to listen to other people's experiences of disadvantage:

> *I couldn't really sit there with other people banging on about what experience they've had, cos that would just send me nuts you know. It would be like, 'I thought I was bad, but you're worse.'* (Jack)

A particular problem that could occur with support groups was where participants were encouraged to discuss a range of sensitive issues, but these were not followed up with offers of help. Three young people who had participated in support groups raised this issue. Martin had left a compulsory probation group for this reason and his failure to attend had contributed to his being sent back to prison.

Job-search coaching

The young people were asked if they would find it useful to have someone help them to plan the steps they needed to take to prepare for work, and whether they would value help in the development of job-search skills, such as making applications and dealing with interviews. Some said that they were already highly motivated for work and felt confident about selling themselves effectively to employers. Others acknowledged that their lifestyles when unemployed were somewhat incompatible with work, but felt that they were able to adapt quite quickly once they found a job.

Several young people described their resentment at having been forced to undertake job-search courses in order to retain their

benefits when they felt they did not need this kind of help. Others disliked the authoritarian approach and school-like atmosphere of some of the courses. Melanie explained the importance of allowing unemployed people to take some initiative:

> *They're all very good ideas, but if they're done in a rigid way – being set this and set that and set the other – I think it would cause more problems than they're worth. People, not people – myself – I don't particularly like being told what to do, and that is a problem, especially if I'm going to be employed. Structure – giving a structure is a good idea, but being able to make some of the structure up yourself.*

Other young people described how much they had enjoyed job-search courses and how these had helped to increase their confidence. Some of those we interviewed felt that they would benefit from help to establish work routines, and help to improve interview techniques was seen as especially useful. Daniel described how, without such help, he might never have found a job:

> *I didn't know what to say. I'd go in, they'd ask you questions: 'What could you contribute to this company?' 'Er, er, I don't know.' You didn't know what to say. But I went to this course thing and I went to a job: 'What can you contribute to this company?' 'I'm a reliable person, I can work by myself or with others.' You know. Before I didn't know how to say that.*

Although all the young people we spoke to had entered New Deal, a considerable number had unmet needs for help in developing interview skills. Josie said:

> *As long as you've got confidence within, you'll be all right, whereas I didn't have none … If you have an employee and employer like sitting there, you could do interview techniques and stuff like that. I don't know anywhere that does that. That would be a good idea. At least, then, you'd know what sort of questions they were going to ask. You're going to be prepared for your answers, which would be quite good.*

Work trials

Almost all of the young people we spoke to were highly motivated to work. One illustration of this was their keenness to undertake work trials, despite worries about expenses, and the lingering feeling that they could be exploitative. Lack of experience was a huge barrier for many of these young people and work trials provided them with something new to put on their CVs. They also hoped that there might be the prospect of further employment once the trial period was completed:

> *I think it would be great, yeah, it would be good. It gives you more help, you know, and helps you to find a good job. And plus, if they ask, you can tell them you've done this, you've done that. Just say you go to apply for a packing job and you have different experience or different qualifications, that might still help. Yeah, I say that would help you and they might keep you.* (Fatima)

Some Asian young people saw work trials as a way of proving themselves to employers. Zabir, for example, felt that they would be a way of overcoming the prejudice that he believed to exist among white employers:

Asian people, you know, lot of them have got massive, huge skills, so I think that, if somebody can say 'Try me, test me for a week', go for it. I think it is a very good idea. That's what I always thought of when I applied for my job. Test me, give me the opportunity, test me in one week. I will be doing your work, even voluntary … Take Asian people, try them one week and it will sort the problems.

The opportunity for a work trial was seen as interesting and enjoyable by many young people who were disillusioned by the kind of support they had obtained while unemployed. Barry, for example, came across as apathetic about job search, but was enthusiastic about the idea of an opportunity to try out 'any trade', in particular as an electrician, painter, carpenter or mechanic. Several young women would have liked to try out occupations such as hairdressing or catering before embarking on a college course. Other young people saw work trials as providing the chance to try out more unusual careers. They could also provide the opportunity to try a job and leave if it was unsuitable, without jeopardising benefit eligibility.

The main drawback of work trials was not the issue of working for nothing (although some young people pointed this out as a factor likely to put other people off), but the prospect of disappointment when the trial came to an end. John described the way that it might raise his spirits, only to dash them again. Rasheed said that he would rather just start a job:

Work trial is different, you know what I mean. A person who goes for that will have on his mind 'If I don't do right … this could happen.'

Training opportunities

Training opportunities were generally seen as providing a chance to catch up with competitors in the labour market and almost all the young people we spoke to were keen to receive more training. Tariq, who was about to start training as a bus driver after leaving a higher level business course because of family problems, had asked employers to train him in factory work:

I said 'Train me, give me a training. See how, for a week or two. If you think I'm not good enough for the job, OK.' …Some say 'We don't have time to train someone.' Some say 'We don't work that way.' They don't see it profitable to train someone or anything like that in a factory.

Julie had left school at the age of 12 and felt that she deserved a second chance to gain some qualifications:

I should be able to go to college as many years as I like, take as many courses as I like, get all the certificates I like, and then eventually I feel I've got enough to qualify for so many jobs, go and get a job. So they wouldn't have to worry about me saying 'Oh, I couldn't get a job because I haven't got what I need for it.' So, I think, if they help people a lot more to college and things like that, the unemployment would go down.

Many young people particularly wanted opportunities for on-the-job training and several expressed their willingness to work for low pay in return for the chance to train. As well as providing opportunities for development, such training was seen as providing security for young people who lacked confidence when they first started a job. Ruksana had been provided

with such training on her New Deal employment option placement. She had never worked before starting this job as a dental receptionist and was worried that she would not be able to cope. She described how her boss had trained her and had taken her on as a permanent employee at the end of the placement:

> *I didn't have a clue how to do it, so he actually trained me … And it actually took me about six months to actually get used to it because some people do take time and I was one of those who took a long time to actually pick up everything … for the first six months I was on New Deal and then afterwards he actually employed me.*

Employment advocacy

Like work trials, advocacy was seen as a way of helping young people to get a chance with employers. Mary had received this kind of help through New Deal:

> *If I went and everything, I wouldn't really know what to say, I'd be really shy … My New Deal adviser actually did sort all that out for me, so I wouldn't have owt like to worry about.*

Several young people felt that, if organisations could help them prepare employers in advance for the support they might need, this might help them to retain a job for longer. For example, Fatima had a sight impairment and problems with her back. She was positive about the idea of preparing employers for this in advance:

> *Well, it's good, isn't it? The employer – you tell him about your problems and he reacts, sort of, training and everything, you know. It would help you because they will know as well. Without going to that place, working place and the same employer doesn't know you have this problem and they say 'Oh, we don't want this person who's got this problem' or 'You can't do this', and they can sack you. And, if they know, then they might understand.*

However, young people who had found it difficult to get a job were generally wary of bringing up issues that employers might see as negative and several felt that it might be counterproductive to tell the employer too much about their problems. Akash, for example, felt it would be helpful to have someone putting pressure on employers to provide a proper training package, but that it would only work if everyone received the same treatment:

> *They've basically got to do that with everyone, everyone that applies for a job, so that it becomes the norm for employers to see that sort of thing happens. Whereas, if I was one in ten employees that was getting that sort of help, my employer would be twice as likely to fire me … If the other ten people had people behind them saying to the employers 'Look, what kind of training package are you offering to this guy? Why ain't you doing this for him?' You know, the employer would feel genuinely pressured. He'd try to do a better job.*

5 Conclusions and policy implications

There is concern that current labour market programmes, such as New Deal, may not be fully meeting the needs of those people who are most disadvantaged. This project aimed to discover more about the employment support needs of young people facing multiple disadvantages.

The research showed the following:

- The roots of labour market disadvantage often lay in poor school experiences. The same personal circumstances that could make employment difficult also made school difficult. Frequent moves between schools, especially where these were associated with family difficulties, seemed to have particularly severe effects on labour market transitions.
- Unemployment had an overwhelmingly negative impact on these already disadvantaged young people, depriving them of social contacts and a meaningful routine, increasing their financial insecurity and undermining their confidence.
- Most of those we interviewed had some employment experience but this was usually in part-time, temporary and low-skilled work. Lack of labour market security made it very difficult for young people to achieve security and independence in their finances or living arrangements. Most dreamed of a full-time permanent job offering the prospect of security for themselves and their families, and the chance to realise their potential.
- Problems accessing childcare facilities were a major barrier to work for young mothers, particularly when they had no support from other family members.

Support workers from the organisations we spoke to tended to deal with disadvantaged young people who were at some distance from the labour market. They were concerned with:

- ways of engaging people who were experiencing a range of problems and encouraging them to access help
- providing support in a flexible way that was appropriate to the needs of individuals
- helping young people to set both shorter- and longer-term goals for themselves, and to work towards these in a planned way
- raising confidence, and developing discipline and motivation
- breaking down barriers to employment.

Although structure was seen as important, most support workers felt that opportunities to make progress were lost where disadvantaged young people were asked to wait for help. Gains could also be wiped out if support was withdrawn when young people reached certain milestones, such as starting a job. They emphasised the importance of providing disadvantaged young people with opportunities to succeed, while also building up their resilience to cope with experiences of rejection.

Some of the young people blamed themselves for their poor prospects in the labour market, but their stories showed that many had also been let down in various ways.

Above all, they felt that they needed to be given a chance. Aged between 20 and 26 years at the time of our interviews, they were still at the beginning of their working lives, but many felt that opportunities for education, training and careers guidance had already passed them by. Almost without exception, they were keen to receive more employment support and all were enthusiastic about at least some of the types that were suggested. These young people, who had all experienced combinations of difficult personal circumstances, wanted:

- professional and other kinds of support delivered by people who were friendly, caring and understanding of their experiences
- help and guidance with setting long-term employment goals
- the opportunity to take some of the initiative themselves, to make choices and to decide the kinds of support that would be most appropriate for them
- helpful and flexible advisers, who made them feel that they were worth making an effort for
- more help in preparing themselves for interviews
- more opportunities to gain work experience, skills and qualifications
- the chance to prove their abilities to employers.

The 20 organisations we visited provided examples of some of the excellent work that is being done to set up employment support services that are appropriate to the needs of multiply disadvantaged young people. Their approach, combining friendly accessible services, flexible support provided when the young people needed it, specialist help with particular issues, help to raise confidence and a focus on selling young people to employers on the basis of their positive abilities, was largely what disadvantaged young people wanted. However, such services are resource intensive and available only in certain areas, and most of the young people we spoke to had not had access to this degree of support, although they had all taken part in New Deal.

New Deal itself could embody many of the positive features described above, but its success in doing so was highly dependent on the commitment of individual personal advisers, who did not always have the resources to provide an intensive service to New Deal clients. Some disadvantaged young people found it hard to trust Employment Service advisers, who provided support but could also withdraw it, cutting people's benefits if they did not comply with certain conditions. Restrictions on eligibility for New Deal support, and on the length and intensity of support that could be provided, also reduced the value of this programme for many disadvantaged young people.

A key finding of this research was that appropriate labour market support was highly valued by young people with multiple disadvantages. They were keen to receive more such support, and were motivated to make an effort themselves where they saw the possibility of improved employment prospects. Inappropriate provision, on the other hand, was seen as a waste of resources and a waste of young people's time. Disabled young people

were particularly likely to have spent years without work. The provision of more intensive support to help these young people find work might have cost more initially, but would probably have resulted in savings over the longer term.

The research has a number of implications for policy development in this area:

- Many young people require additional support in school, either as a result of special educational needs or because of personal circumstances such as being in care. Early provision of such support could avoid much of the labour market disadvantage currently associated with these circumstances.
- Young people with multiple disadvantages have longer and more complex transitions from education to the labour market than their peers, and are likely to require support beyond the age of 19, when support from the Connexions service ends, particularly where they are not in close contact with their families.
- As levels of unemployment fall, the unemployed population is increasingly made up of people with multiple disadvantages, but many are highly motivated to find work. If the New Deal for Young People is to reach this group, it will need to incorporate the types of personalised, intensive and flexible support that organisations working with disadvantaged young people have found to be effective. This support needs to be provided early, and to incorporate opportunities and rewards for achievement.
- Funding for employment support work needs to recognise the long-term and incremental nature of redressing labour market disadvantage, and should not be linked solely to the achievement of job outcomes.
- Funding regimes need to be flexible enough to allow support to be provided in at least the initial stages of employment if job outcomes are to be sustained by the most disadvantaged.
- Disadvantaged young people need to be given a chance, but many employers are not prepared to take the risk. The expansion of social firms and Intermediate Labour Markets could provide one source of vacancies for groups that find it hard to get a foothold in the labour market. Mainstream employers should also be encouraged to employ more disadvantaged young people, and should be given more support when they do so.

Notes

Chapter 1

1 See, for instance, the recent government White Paper *Towards Full Employment in a Modern Society* (The Stationery Office, 2001), which states that 'more needs to be done … to help those with multiple barriers to work, such as homelessness, mental health problems, or drug or alcohol misuse' (p. 24).

2 Forty-nine interviews were carried out but one proved impossible to transcribe.

3 NVivo 1.2.

4 Surveys were carried out by the British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) and analysed by the Policy Studies Institute (see Bryson *et al*., 2000; Bonjour *et al*., 2001). There were around 6,010 respondents to the first wave of interviews, which were undertaken approximately six months after the young people entered New Deal, representing a response rate of about 54 per cent. Of these respondents, 3,391 also completed a second-wave interview, approximately 18 months after entering the programme; 2,988 said that they would be prepared to be contacted for further research and our sample is drawn from this group.

Chapter 2

1 Although this is likely to reflect our sampling method, which was unlikely to reach currently homeless young people.

Chapter 3

1 This includes disabled people, lone parents, ex-offenders, care leavers, homeless people, people with English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) needs, people with literacy and numeracy problems and former members of the armed services.

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Appendix 1

Organisational characteristics

Org.*	Main user groups	Main services	Access criteria	Time limits?	Location
A	Homeless	Short courses, counselling, residential	Broad	Yes	South East
B	Mental health, disability	Short courses, work placements	Broad	No	South East
C	Offenders and families	Job-search advice, general support	Broad	No	North East
D	Unemployed, minority ethnic groups	New Deal	Narrow	Yes	North West
E	Disability, learning disability	Supported work placements, brokerage	Broad	No	South East
F	Drug users, ex-offenders	Detox referrals, work placements	Broad	No	North West
G	Homeless, refugees	ESOL, job search, careers advice	Broad	Yes	South East
H	Disability, learning disability	Work experience, supported placements, brokerage	Broad	No	North East
I	Alcohol and drug users and families	Counselling	Broad	No	South East
J	Care leavers	Careers advice, residential, work placements	Narrow	No	South East
K	Refugees	Careers advice, ESOL, vocational courses	Broad	No	South East
L	Minority ethnic groups	Careers advice, work placement, short courses	Broad	No	South East
M	Alcohol and drug users, minority ethnic groups, homeless people	Counselling, detox, IT courses	Broad	No	South East
N	Unemployed, minority ethnic groups, ex-offenders	Brokerage, referrals to training provision	Broad	No	South East

continued overleaf

Org.*	Main user groups	Main services	Access criteria	Time limits?	Location
O	Ex-offenders, basic skills needs	Basic skills training, job search, mentoring	Narrow	No	South East
P	Ex-offenders, care leavers	Careers advice	Narrow	No	South East
Q	Refugees	Training	Broad	Yes	South East
R	Disability, mental health, learning disability	Training, work placements	Broad	Yes	South East
S	Unemployed drug users	Referral to detox, job search, general support	Narrow	No	South East
T	Unemployed, women, minority ethnic groups, lone parents	Training, work placements	Broad	No	South East

*Org. = Organisation

Appendix 2

Characteristics of multiply disadvantaged young people

Table A2.1 Number of 'selection' disadvantages experienced, by type of disadvantage

Row percentages

	Number of disadvantages experienced					
	None	One	Two	Three or more	*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All respondents to both surveys	51	28	13	8	*3,391*	*3,391*
JRF sample	0	6	63	30	–	*49*
Those who experienced:						
Problems with the law	0	25	37	38	*347*	*349*
Homelessness	0	30	30	40	*504*	*496*
Problems with drugs or alcohol	0	8	30	62	*205*	*113*
Time in care	0	19	24	58	*183*	*166*
Poor mental health (wave 1)	0	29	31	40	*362*	*359*
Disability or long-term health problem	0	39	32	29	*440*	*436*
Literacy or numeracy problems	0	46	31	23	*838*	*864*

Table A2.2 Percentage who experienced various additional disadvantages, by number of selection disadvantages experienced (respondents to both New Deal surveys)

Column percentages (multiple response)

	Number of disadvantages experienced		
	None	One	Two or more
	%	%	%
No qualifications	13	26	42
No driving licence	68	76	82
Private or social rented housing	58	68	80
Financial hardship in last 12 months	59	76	82
Series of temporary or casual jobs	34	36	40
Never employed	30	33	31
Lacked confidence in ability to find work	10	19	29
Weighted base	*1,730*	*944*	*717*
Unweighted base	*1,715*	*956*	*720*

Table A2.3 Experience of disadvantage by gender and major ethnic group (respondents to both New Deal surveys)

Column percentages (multiple response)

Disadvantage	Male %	Female %	White %	Black %	Asian %
Problems with the law	14	1	11	9	4
Homelessness	15	14	16	13	6
Drug or alcohol problems	5	1	4	1	1
Time in care	5	6	6	11	1
Poor mental health	13	10	11	13	11
Disability	13	13	14	7	8
Basic skills problems	25	23	25	28	22
No qualifications	24	20	24	21	20
No driving licence	72	80	75	83	58
Rented housing	64	68	66	84	38
Financial hardship	70	64	69	75	54
Series of temporary or casual jobs	38	33	37	39	29
Never employed	28	37	29	32	53
Lacked confidence in ability to find work	16	18	16	16	18
Weighted base	*2,387*	*1,004*	*2,917*	*143*	*276*
Unweighted base	*2,383*	*1,008*	*2,715*	*190*	*400*

Table A2.4 Number of depth interviewees, by region of residence, gender and ethnicity

	London and South East	Yorkshire and Humberside	West Midlands
Men			
Black African	1	0	0
Black Caribbean/other	2	0	2
Indian	2	0	0
Pakistani	0	1	2
Bangladeshi	0	1	1
White UK	2	9	4
White other	1	1	0
Women			
Black African	2	0	0
Black Caribbean/other	2	0	0
Indian	0	0	0
Pakistani	0	2	1
Bangladeshi	1	0	1
White UK	6	3	2
White other	0	0	0

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