

# Work and worklessness in deprived neighbourhoods

## Policy assumptions and personal experiences

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**This study contrasts policy assumptions about work and worklessness with the personal experiences of residents living in deprived neighbourhoods.**

Recent employment policy has centred on a number of claims about why people do not have jobs and the benefits of employment for individual and family life. This report draws on detailed interviews with residents in deprived neighbourhoods across Britain to reflect on the validity of these assumptions at a time of recession and far-reaching welfare reform.

Four key themes are explored:

- how workless residents perceive the availability of work in a recession;
- the experiences of work among residents and how this compares with official claims about the benefits of work;
- how workless parents feel about returning to work, and the impact of employment on family life for those in work;
- the potential for training and education to help workless people enter the labour market or, once in work, to secure better jobs.



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# Executive summary

This paper examines the experience and perceptions of work and worklessness among 180 residents living in six relatively deprived areas in order to reflect critically on key policy agendas. Across four key themes – the availability of work; the quality and benefits of work; work and family life; and occupational mobility – it finds that there is often a significant gap between the assumptions embedded in policies on employment and welfare reform and the experiences of residents.

## The availability of work in a recession

Government policy has concentrated largely on supply-side measures focused on raising employability on the assumption that worklessness is related to a lack of skills, aptitude or motivation rather than to a lack of jobs. However, our research shows:

- Many residents contended that finding work was difficult even before the current economic downturn, because of a lack of suitable jobs.
- Moreover, the evidence from the second wave of interviews conducted in 2009 shows that the recession has exacerbated difficulties in finding work.

This suggests policy-makers may need to extend the scope of new demand-side interventions such as the Future Jobs Fund, particularly in areas of low demand.

## Job quality and the experience of work

Employment policy centres on claims that work delivers a number of social and economic benefits to individuals. Our research found:

- Employment can contribute to self-esteem and a sense of independence, as well as provide valued social interaction.
- However, it is equally the case that many residents are trapped in ‘poor work’, characterised by combinations of low pay, long hours or pervasive job insecurity.
- Poverty-level pay can force those in employment to work excessive hours or, in the case of those out of work, can act as a disincentive to leave benefits.

This indicates the Government needs to focus more on the quality of available jobs in terms of pay, conditions and sustainability, with greater responsibility placed on employers to deliver good quality work.

## The impact of work on family life

Employment policy is focused on increasing access to formal childcare to enable parents to return to work based partly on the claim that work is beneficial to family life. This study challenges this view as it found:

- A number of respondents identified tensions between work and parenting, including the inability of low-paid work to support childcare costs and the lack of flexibility within jobs to fulfil parenting responsibilities.

- There was also a marked reluctance to use formal childcare, for both moral and financial reasons, with a preference for using close family as carers.

These findings suggest that policy-makers need to focus more on the affordability of childcare, on encouraging employers to provide ‘family-friendly’ jobs and on supporting informal childcare. There is also a need for a more open policy debate on the appropriate balance between parenting responsibilities and work.

## **Skills, training and progression in work**

Official policy promotes training or education as a springboard for entry into the labour market or progression in work by providing individuals with the skills to bypass low-skilled, low-waged work. Our research showed:

- This is an important objective, as a number of interviewees lacked opportunities for progression in their current job or had experienced downward occupational mobility during their working lives.
- But our research also found that poverty and parenting responsibilities can restrict opportunities for training or education, or for capitalising on newly acquired skills; skills development is not an automatic passport to better employment opportunities.

This suggests that social mobility remains a valuable policy goal, but more immediate benefits might be realised by improving the terms and conditions associated with the low-skilled, low-paid employment that dominates the working lives of many of those living in the least buoyant labour markets.

# 1 Introduction

Work plays a central role in several government policy agendas. Increasing employment levels among the workless is the primary goal of the welfare reform programme outlined in the recent *Raising Expectations* White Paper (DWP, 2008a), with employment also promoted as the fastest and most effective route out of poverty. Work is also identified alongside economic development as one of the key policy mechanisms for regenerating deprived areas as part of the *Transforming Places* agenda (CLG, 2008). Employment is further highlighted as one of the key catalysts of social mobility within the *New Opportunities* White Paper (HMG, 2009a). At the same time, the recent economic downturn means that the issue of worklessness is rising up the political agenda and is likely to stay there for some time if levels of worklessness continue to rise as anticipated.

It is therefore apt and timely that both work and worklessness should figure as the central themes of this paper, which is the first in a series of working papers to emerge from our major study of the relationship between poverty and place. These working papers will examine the experience and perceptions of 180 residents living in six relatively deprived areas in order to reflect critically on key policy agendas. This paper focuses on attitudes to and experiences of work and worklessness, and frames these against recent policy and legislative developments designed to encourage wider participation in the labour market. In doing so, it aims to interrogate the central assumptions underpinning policy on employment and welfare reform.

The paper draws on qualitative interviews undertaken in two waves in spring 2008 and spring 2009 and is, therefore, well placed to explore the impact of the recession that developed in this period. At the time of going to print, the rise in worklessness shows no sign of abating. In May 2009, levels of unemployment based on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) measure

shot up by a record 281,000 to take the jobless total to 2.38 million, the highest level since 1995. Evidently, this is a crucial juncture at which to consider the economic and social well-being of residents of some of Britain's more disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

This paper forms part of a wider research project, *'Living through change in challenging neighbourhoods'*, which is a three-year research programme supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation examining, through a mix of research methods, the changing experiences and circumstances of a group of households in order to develop a better understanding of:

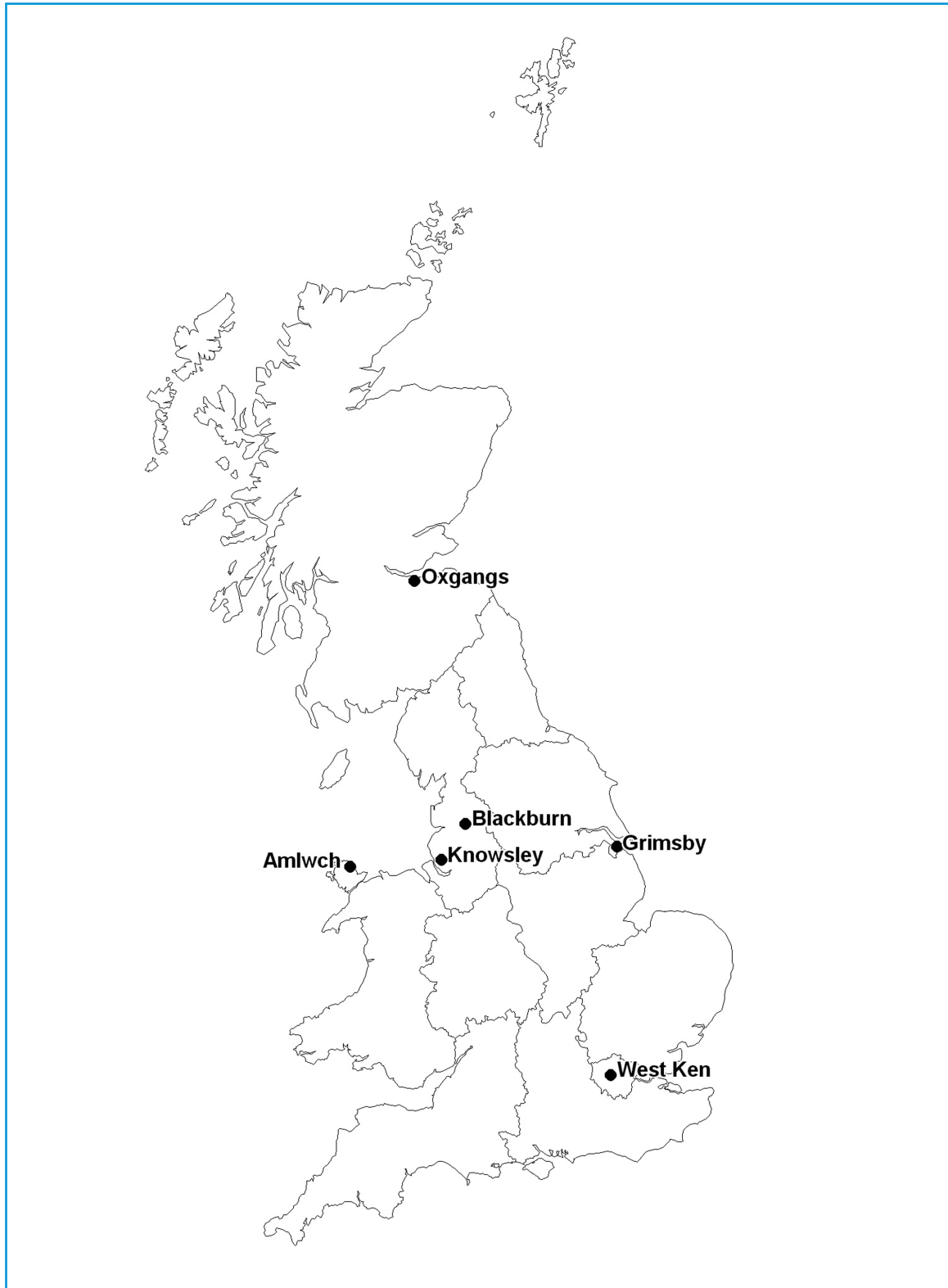
- how the experiences of households in relatively deprived areas vary by neighbourhood context and over time;
- the salience of 'place' in the perceptions, actions and decisions made by different types of household, in different contexts;
- which aspects of living in or on the margins of poverty seem to be most affected by neighbourhood context and which, by contrast, seem relatively impervious to context and to transcend locality;
- the circumstances facing individuals and households so that some struggle to get by and manage on low incomes while others seem to cope better with the inevitable constraints and difficulties that need to be overcome.

Six neighbourhoods have been selected as case studies for the research: Amlwch (Ynys Mons/Anglesey in North Wales), Hillside (North Huyton estate, Knowsley, Merseyside), Oxfords (an estate south of Edinburgh city centre), Wensley Fold (a neighbourhood close to the centre of Blackburn,

Lancashire), West Kensington (in north Fulham, London) and West Marsh (Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire). These neighbourhoods are hereafter referred to as Amlwch, Knowsley, Oxfgangs, Blackburn, West Kensington and Grimsby. The location of these neighbourhoods is shown on the map in Figure 1.

While these neighbourhoods were all selected for being relatively deprived, levels of worklessness vary across the study areas, as Table 1 indicates.

Figure 1: Case study areas map





While all the case study neighbourhoods exhibit higher levels of JSA and IB/SDA claimant rates than both the local authority and national comparators, the differences are most stark in Knowsley, Blackburn, Grimsby and Amlwch where at least one of the two indicators is more than twice as high as the national average. This is likely to reflect their location in more isolated, less buoyant labour markets compared to the West Kensington and Oxfords areas situated in the two capital cities (London and Edinburgh).

Thirty interviews were conducted in each of these neighbourhoods in 2008, with approximately 20 of these residents in each area subsequently reinterviewed in 2009. A final wave of interviews with a subset of these households will be undertaken in 2010 to track changes in their own experiences and in the neighbourhoods where they live (for a review of stage 1 of the research, see CRESR, 2009). The analyses presented in this paper are drawn from all interviews conducted in 2008, but only those undertaken in Grimsby, Blackburn, Amlwch and Oxfords in 2009 as the research team had not yet returned to either West Kensington or Knowsley by the time of publication.

Before turning to the interviews undertaken in the first round of the research, we set the context in Chapter 2 by reviewing recent policy initiatives implemented by the current Government and devolved administrations in order to tackle

worklessness, as well as alternative proposals made by the Conservative Party in recent statements. This chapter also considers how the Government has responded to the recession that developed from spring 2008 onwards. This is followed in subsequent chapters by a critical analysis of this policy context based on the perceptions and experiences of residents around four key themes:

- the availability of work and the impact of the recession;
- job quality and the experience of work;
- work and family life;
- skills, training and progression in work.

**Table 1: Estimated percentage of working-age residents claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Incapacity Benefit (IB)/Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA) in the six case study areas**

	JSA (%) Quarter 4 2008	IB/SDA (%) Quarter 4 2008
Amlwch case study	6	12
Anglesey local authority (LA)	3	9
Wales	3	6
Blackburn case study	5	17
Blackburn with Darwen LA	4	11
West Kensington case study	4	10
Hammersmith & Fulham LA	3	6
Grimsby case study	8	9
North East Lincolnshire LA	4	7
Knowsley case study	8	19
Knowsley LA	5	13
England	3	7
Oxfords case study	3 <sup>a</sup>	16 <sup>b</sup>
City of Edinburgh LA	2 <sup>a</sup>	7 <sup>b</sup>
Scotland	2 <sup>a</sup>	9 <sup>b</sup>

Base: working age population. a figures relate to Q4 2007. b figures relate to Q2 2008

Source: DWP and ONS.

## 2 The policy context

Government policy on tackling worklessness has three core components:

- ‘making work pay’ through the National Minimum Wage and tax credits system;
- mandating participation in welfare-to-work programmes, including the Flexible New Deal and Pathways to Work or other forms of work-related activities;
- tackling concentrated areas of worklessness through area-based interventions such as the Working Neighbourhoods Fund.

These policies are underpinned by two key claims.

- worklessness is predominantly a supply-side phenomenon best tackled through a focus on improving employability.
- the ‘right’ to benefit has to be balanced with the ‘responsibility’ to look for work.

While the Conservative Party shares the view that worklessness is a supply-side phenomenon and has explicitly supported the latest welfare reform bill, its employment proposals differ in three key ways:

- a focus on ‘family breakdown’ as both a cause and a consequence of worklessness, and a subsequent intention to promote marriage;
- an explicit commitment to ‘control’ in-migration from abroad to reduce competition for jobs in the UK labour market;
- proposals for a far tougher conditionality regime, which would impose a three-year ban on benefits for Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants who refused a third ‘suitable’ job.

Government efforts aimed at reducing worklessness have comprised three key strands. First, attention has focused on ‘making work pay’ and seeking to convince those out of work of the financial benefits of employment. Reforms have included the introduction in 1999 of the National Minimum Wage and the Working Family Tax Credit scheme (now Working Tax Credit) that ‘tops up’ low in-work incomes.

The second component is the roll-out of welfare-to-work programmes, which began with the introduction of the New Deal suite of schemes during New Labour’s first term (see DWP, 2004 for a full description). The New Deal was followed in 2003 by the introduction of the Pathways to Work programme, which targets new claimants on Incapacity Benefit (now being replaced by the Employment and Support Allowance). Pathways to Work is less prescriptive than the New Deal in that it requires participants to attend work-focused interviews but does not mandate them to take part in training or education, or to apply for, or accept, specific jobs. Nonetheless, Pathways marks a fundamental change in the structure of the benefit system by extending conditional forms of welfare from the unemployed to the economically inactive.

The third component of government policy has focused attention on concentrated areas of worklessness. These are presumed to represent segregated communities that nurture cultures at odds with the work ethic, thereby restricting access to employment opportunities. This conviction has resulted in various targeted initiatives, such as the Working Neighbourhoods Pilots and Working Neighbourhoods Fund, as well as a more general commitment to break down concentrations of worklessness through the promotion of social mix (HM Treasury, 2003, p. 50). The most recent statement on the future direction of regeneration policy, the *Transforming Places* consultation document (CLG, 2008), places tackling worklessness and economic development

at the heart of efforts to revitalise deprived neighbourhoods.

Plans to reform further the welfare system to reduce worklessness are outlined in the Government's recent *Raising Expectations* White Paper (DWP, 2008a; see also DWP, 2002, 2004, 2006 for past welfare reforms). It proposes a number of significant changes to benefit rules, which will mean that only three groups will remain exempt from requirements to engage in some form of work-related activity as a condition of benefit entitlement: the most severely sick and disabled Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants; lone parents with babies under 1; and full-time carers (see Table 2).

These policies to tackle worklessness are underpinned by two claims. The first is the premise that worklessness is predominantly a supply-side phenomenon best tackled through a focus on improving employability. This includes addressing issues of motivation as evident in pronouncements in the White Paper that there needs 'to be clear consequences for those who play the system or who do not take work if it is available' (DWP,

2008a, p. 22). Such statements indicate that the Government believes that a cultural propensity to avoid work is part of the explanation for high levels of worklessness in a locality. The second claim centres on a moral discourse of 'rights and responsibilities' that has pervaded official statements on welfare reform from the mid-1990s (DSS, 1998, p. 1; DWP, 2007, p. 2; also Levitas, 2005, p. 121). In various spheres, the Government has embraced the notion that '*post-war democracy was too eager to extend the scope of individual rights without any corresponding concern with the responsibilities attached to rights*' (Driver and Martell, 1998, p. 130). Accordingly, there is some degree of obligatory work-related activity embedded within nearly all the welfare-to-work programmes (see DWP, 2008b).

While welfare is delivered through a single, common policy framework across Great Britain, the devolved administrations have powers to implement complementary programmes to tackle worklessness. The Scottish Executive has provided additional funding for tackling worklessness as part of a series of area-based regeneration initiatives, including the Community Planning Partnerships currently administered through the Fairer Scotland Fund (see Fyfe, 2009 for more details). Raising employment levels is also a target within the Scottish Government's overarching strategy for tackling deprivation – *Achieving Our Potential: A Framework to Tackle Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland* published in 2008 (see Sinclair and McKendrick, 2009 for a full account). In Wales, the Communities First area-based regeneration initiative seeks to reduce levels of economic inactivity and raise employability as one component of its approach to tackling spatial disadvantage. While initiatives delivered through the devolved administrations can only effectively complement, rather than circumvent or replace, the UK-wide benefits system, this means there is some scope for the Scottish and Welsh Governments to implement different approaches to tackling worklessness.

There are two developments that could affect the roll-out of welfare reforms across the UK. The first is the onset of recession and the increase in worklessness. As of May 2009, levels of unemployment based on the ILO measure shot up by a record 281,000 to take the jobless total

Table 2: Key proposals in the Welfare Reform White Paper

Category	Changes to benefit rules
Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants	A tougher sanctions regime; and a new pilot programme of full-time, community-based work experience – 'work for your benefit' – for those who have not found work within 24 months.
Lone parents claiming Income Support	Income Support will be abolished, with all lone parents transferred to JSA once their youngest child reaches 7. Lone parents whose youngest child is aged between 3 and 7 will be obliged to take steps to return to work, such as upgrading skills. Those with children aged between 1 and 3 will be required to attend work-focused interviews as under the present arrangements, but will not be required to take steps to prepare for work.
Incapacity Benefit (IB) claimants	All new and existing IB clients will be transferred onto a new benefit called the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) by 2013, with all but the most sick or disabled mandated to participate in Pathways to Work.

to 2.38 million, the highest level since 1995. Such increases are likely to impact on the capacity of the Government to implement proposed welfare reforms. Ambitious targets for reducing the numbers on benefits such as IB/ESA by one million may be extremely difficult to achieve in an increasingly competitive job market. Moreover, research on the current recession indicates that it has disproportionately affected more vulnerable groups and disadvantaged areas, despite some early predictions that this would be a 'white-collar' recession in the South following retrenchment in the financial sector. A report by the DWP and Equality and Human Rights Commission (2009) shows, for example, that the fall in the employment rate over the past year has been higher for young people, the lowest qualified and those living in deprived areas than the fall in the overall national rate. This further undermines the potential impact of planned welfare reforms, as those out of work are vulnerable groups who will be more difficult to place in employment, especially in a context of shrinking vacancies and growing supply of potential workers.

The Government has responded to the recession with a series of short-term initiatives targeting primarily young people on the grounds that this is the group most likely to be 'scarred' by long-term unemployment as skills and job prospects atrophy. This package of measures includes:

- an additional £140 million in 2009–10 to create an extra 35,000 apprenticeships;
- a guarantee by January 2010 that every 18 to 24 year old who is approaching twelve months' unemployment or more will be offered a new job, training or paid work experience;
- a 'September guarantee' of a place in education and training to every 16 and 17 year old who wants one – this amounts to an extra 54,500 student places in the 2009–10 academic year;
- training and recruitment subsidies targeting primarily long-term unemployed young people to access up to 100,000 jobs in growing sectors including the care and hospitality sectors;

- a new £1.1 billion Future Jobs Fund, which will provide funding across Britain for 150,000 short-term jobs that last at least six months (at a maximum cost of £6,500 per job) targeted primarily at 18–24 year olds out of work for twelve months or more, but some jobs will also be made available to other disadvantaged groups and unemployment hot spots.

Of these measures, the Future Jobs Fund is perhaps the most significant, because its explicit aim to create employment, albeit through temporary funding only, is a marked shift away from the previous supply-side focus of government policy on tackling worklessness.

The second development that could affect the roll-out of welfare reform is the real possibility that New Labour will not be in power to see through these reforms after the next General Election to be held by May 2010 at the latest. Predicting the direction of policy under any future Conservative administration is not wholly straightforward. The last official policy document by the Conservative Party – *Work for Welfare* (Conservative Party, 2008) – was published in January 2008, before both the current Government's welfare reform Green Paper (DWP, 2008c) and the White Paper (DWP, 2008a), and indeed before the current economic downturn. Identifying Conservative party policy in the period since January 2008 becomes a matter of analysing speeches and press releases delivered by the Conservative front bench. What these pronouncements reveal is a striking degree of cross-party consensus. The welfare reform bill has received strong support from the shadow Minister for Work and Pensions, Theresa May, who wrote, somewhat mischievously, before the bill's second reading in January 2009 that:

*... the Conservative party is going to support the government's welfare reform bill ... Admittedly, many of the proposals in the bill are ideas that we announced a year ago, but I am delighted the government has adopted them and we'll use our votes to help them get the reforms past their own back benches.*

(May, 2009)

The readiness of the Conservative Party to support such a key component of a Labour Government's

legislative programme reflects the degree to which the bill chimed with the logics underpinning Conservative party thinking. First, Conservative policy also subscribes to the view that all claimants identified as capable of work '*will be expected to work or prepare for work*' (Conservative Party, 2008, p. 8). Second, the policy supports the notion that entitlement to benefits is not automatic but confers responsibilities to look for work, with the former Shadow Work and Pensions Minister, Chris Grayling, speaking of a need to: '*balanc[e] entitlement with responsibility. Putting an end to the something for nothing culture that has served this country so badly*' (Grayling, 2008). Third, there is a clear agreement that worklessness is, in part, a supply-side problem, with some individuals making the avoidance of work a priority, as evident in claims in the Conservative Party Green Paper of a 'significant minority who are playing the system' (Conservative Party, 2008).

It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that there are no differences between the positions of the two parties on welfare reform. Indeed, it is possible to point to three substantive differences. First, only the Conservatives have emphasised the imperative to tackle worklessness to '*reverse the disastrous rise in family breakdown*' (Conservative Party, 2008, p. 9) alongside the shared objectives of reducing poverty and increasing social mobility (compare DWP, 2008a and Conservative Party, 2008). As a result, the Conservatives have argued that welfare reform should be used as a tool for '*rewarding marriage*' (Conservative Party, 2008, p. 7). Second, the Conservatives are the only party to make an explicit link between immigration policy and worklessness among UK residents, claiming that '*up to 80 per cent of new jobs since 1997 have gone to migrants*'. Accordingly, they have a stated commitment to '*control[ing] the number of migrants*' (Conservative Party, 2008, p. 45) and restricting labour supply. Third, the Conservatives intend to impose far tougher sanctions on claimants who refuse to accept '*a reasonable job*' (Conservative Party, 2008, p. 24). Under these proposals a third refusal will prompt an automatic three-year ban on entitlement to out-of-work benefits. The Government's current proposals are less severe, with repeated refusals leading to a withdrawal of benefits for four weeks or resulting

in mandatory participation in workfare activities (DWP, 2008b).

These differences do not alter the conclusion, however, that the welfare policy of a future Conservative Government is likely to be marked more by continuity than radical change (Crisp *et al.*, 2009). Given the apparent extent of cross-party consensus, there is little to suggest that this process of welfare reform would be derailed by a change of government at the next General Election.

In the following four chapters we move on to consider how the broad assumptions that have underpinned these policies on welfare reform and worklessness match up against the experiences, motivations and perceptions of respondents in our six case study neighbourhoods.



# 3 The availability of work in a recession

## Policy assumption

Government policy has concentrated largely on supply-side measures focused on raising employability on the assumption that worklessness is related to a lack of skills, aptitude or motivation rather than to a lack of jobs.

## Key messages from the research

- Many of our interview respondents contended that finding work was difficult even before the current economic downturn, because of a lack of suitable jobs.
- Moreover, the evidence from the second wave of interviews conducted in 2009 is that the recession has reduced the number of employment opportunities and exacerbated difficulties in finding work.

## Policy implications

This suggests policy-makers may need to think about extending the scope of demand-led interventions such as the Future Jobs Fund.

Before the onset of the current recession, government policies were based on the economic assumption that worklessness was a supply-side phenomenon best tackled through a focus on improving the employability of those out of work. As Theodore (2007) suggests, proponents of this view focus not on the availability of jobs but on the lack of qualifications, skills and motivation that prevents the workless from accessing employment opportunities (see also Jessop, 2002). This lack of employability is seen to create bottlenecks in the labour market because of the presence of large numbers of workless adults who '*cease to perform [their] market clearing function of creating downward pressures*' (Theodore, 2007, p. 929) on

wages in a way that would encourage employers to create jobs.

This conception of worklessness contains the implicit assumption that '*the causes of unemployment are ... individualistic and behavioural*' (Peck and Theodore, 2000, p. 729). In short, the workless are at least partially responsible for their own predicament. The logic of this reasoning invites '*calls for supply-side interventions towards activating underemployed segments of the labour force through training, job-readiness programming and unemployment benefit reforms that encourage (and increasingly compel) rapid entry into work*' (Theodore, 2007, p. 929).

The Government's adherence to supply-side economics is evident in policy statements such as the view presented in the HM Treasury paper on Full Employment in Every Region that '*the worst concentrations of worklessness are in very small defined areas and are caused not by a lack of jobs but by people living in these areas being unable to compete successfully for the vacancies available*' (HM Treasury, 2003, p. 46). This underlines the assumption that it is not the availability of jobs so much as the inability of jobseekers to access available work that creates worklessness. This is, in part, regarded as a behavioural problem, as in references to a '*culture of worklessness*' coupled to a '*poverty of aspirations*' (HM Treasury, 2003, p. 46).

This perspective has been challenged by some academics who have pointed out that deindustrialisation has created a persistent legacy of weak labour markets in some parts of the UK. Beatty *et al.* (2000) have argued, for example, that regional differences in employment rates conceal forms of '*hidden unemployment*'. This consists of individuals with health problems who lost jobs in the industrial shake-out in the 1980s and 1990s and, finding themselves unable to secure work, were legitimately diverted onto incapacity benefits. It was recently estimated that as many as 1.1 million out of the headline total of 2.7 million

incapacity benefits claimants could reasonably be expected to find work in conditions approximating a full economy (Beatty and Fothergill, 2006). The concentration of this 'hidden unemployment' in the former industrial heartlands suggests that some regional economies have never really recovered from the fall-out of deindustrialisation (see also Turok and Edge, 1999; Webster, 2006; Theodore, 2007).

The recent recession has, however, seen some indication that the Government is moving tentatively away from a supply-side policy focus towards recognising a need to stimulate demand. The £1.5 billion Future Jobs Fund is the prime example of this, with the Government using this to fund local authorities to create short-term jobs for young people aged 18–25 who have been unemployed for longer than twelve months. A recent report by the Centre for Cities (Shaheen, 2009) suggests, nonetheless, that this is only a temporary measure that may have little impact in tackling long-term structural forms of worklessness in the former industrial heartlands. As such, it represents only a limited acceptance of the argument that demand stimulation should play a central role in government policies to tackle worklessness.

Our research in the six case study areas shows that, even in early 2008, before the onset of recession, some respondents found that work was difficult to come by. This is exemplified by the case of one male respondent from Blackburn who was struggling financially after losing his job as joiner:

*Respondent:*

*This January and March and April I've been really bad, I couldn't find a job so it was hard for me to have to pay from my savings, rent and ...*

*Interviewer:*

*You had to pay out of your savings?*

*Respondent:*

*Yeah, bills, council tax I have to pay out for myself.*

A female respondent from Amlwch also highlighted difficulties that her working-age children have faced in securing employment:

*Respondent:*

*Job-wise it's fairly hard to find jobs. My two sons since we've been living up here have been going out every day looking for jobs ... going to the Jobcentre every day and they just keep getting turned down or rejection letters.*

There were also local factors unique to individual case study areas that exacerbated difficulties in finding work. In Amlwch, for example, one non-Welsh speaker who currently works part-time as a midday supervisor at a local school found her employment options limited by the language requirements attached to many vacancies:

*Respondent:*

*It was the only thing I could get, even the cleaning jobs I've applied for they want to know if I'm bilingual or fluent, and I'm not cos I've tried for cleaning jobs, I've tried for everything ... you've got to be bilingual or fluent in Welsh.*

A minority of interviewees challenged the prevailing view that work was hard to come by, however, including this male respondent from Amlwch:

*Respondent:*

*There is jobs if you look for them. I can leave my job and have one tomorrow.*

*Interviewer:*

*In a similar landscape gardening thing or a different job, or ...?*

*Respondent:*

*Different job.*

*Interviewer:*

*And would that be by the Jobcentre or would that be ...*

*Respondent:*

*No, no, word of mouth.*

Nonetheless, it was rare for respondents to highlight an abundance of work opportunities in the local economy in this way. Moreover, the

citation above indicates that particular forms of social capital (Putnam, 2000), namely 'word of mouth', are essential in finding work. Those without access to such social capital may not face the same number of employment opportunities.

The second wave of interviews conducted in 2009 also revealed a marked tendency among interviewees to highlight the negative impact of the recession on the availability of work. This was particularly notable in Grimsby, Blackburn and Amlwch. Sometimes these reflections were couched in terms of identifying closures or redundancies affecting key employers in the local area. In Grimsby, for example, one female interviewee recounted the changes that had taken place over the previous year:

*Respondent:*

*There's quite a few factories shut down now. Both Mariners [food production factories] have closed. I thought the Government was supposed to be helping businesses but they're not. They're more interested at the minute with the cars, these car industries. There's other people ... companies like Youngs [food production factory], it's a big factory, summat like 2,000 people but they got rid of about 90 not so long ago.*

In Amlwch, one female respondent talked in 2009 about the threat of closure of the Rio Tinto aluminium works, which is currently one of the biggest employers in the area:

*Interviewer:*

*So are people struggling to find work then in Amlwch?*

*Respondent:*

*Yeah they are at the moment with the recession because Tinto are going to go, that's going to be a big blow.*

*Interviewer:*

*Is that certain or is it speculation?*

*Respondent:*

*It depends who you talk to, I know [people who] work at Tinto, they reckon it is.*

In the case of some interviewees in employment, this awareness of growing redundancies in the local economy enhanced fears about the precariousness of their own job. One woman in Grimsby working on the same industrial estate where other firms had closed down expressed concerns about her job security:

*Respondent:*

*I was facing redundancy five month ago so I didn't know what was going on, we managed to scrape through at our place but where my factory is, Mariner is another factory, that's closed its doors ... There's been that many redundancies just on the Europarc [industrial estate] itself it's frightening.*

Meanwhile, for those looking for work, this downturn in the local economy was perceived to have a direct impact on the prospects of finding work. One unemployed female interviewee in Blackburn, who formerly worked in a food production factory, recounted her difficulties in finding work locally:

*Interviewer:*

*How long has it been since you've worked?*

*Respondent:*

*It's been about a year or seven to eight months, I just can't find any work no matter where I look ... previously there were jobs but now there aren't any jobs available at all. That's the damage done to us. Quite a few of the companies have closed down, they're pretty large companies as well that have closed down ... so now we have to go to Accrington for jobs because there are some there and in Preston or Blackpool but if you go to the jobcentre in Blackburn there aren't any jobs available at all.*



Despite applying for over 20 jobs over a wide geographical area, the respondent had not received any responses and remained pessimistic about the prospects of finding work.

Another respondent from Amlwch explained how her unemployed husband had not been successful in his efforts to find work as a joiner:

*Respondent:*

*[He] might get a job ... nights, anything.*

*Interviewer:*

*And he's struggling to find work ...?*

*Respondent:*

*Yeah I could show you the phone calls he's made. Come to a full stop at the moment. He's too old now, he's 47, too old to teach new tricks to. He's been a joiner all his life.*

In both these examples of residents looking for work, there was a strong sense of determined but unsuccessful jobsearch combined with a pervasive gloom about the likely prospects of finding work. Respondents clearly felt that their prospects were receding in the wake of the sustained economic downturn.

Yet, despite this strong sense of a commitment to find work among workless respondents, some of those in employment expressed disparaging views about the motivation of workless residents in their neighbourhood. The first quote below is from a woman working as a cleaner in Grimsby and the second from a young man employed in a supermarket in the same town:

*Respondent 1:*

*Is it down to lack to education or is it down to 'I don't care'? Obviously like every other town there is an awful lot of unemployment here but I think also my youngest son's generation don't want to work and they don't see why they should work.*

*Respondent 2:*

*I know a lot of people can't find jobs, but some of them are just bone lazy and don't want to work and drugs and that but I think they should make them people clean up the parks, clear up the rivers to make their*

*money, earn the money. I know some of them can't but it helps everything. If the council can't afford to pick up litter and pick up stuff out of the river so why are they paying those people to sit on their bums, why can't they come and do it for a couple of hours a day?*

Another respondent in Grimsby simultaneously advanced a 'culture of worklessness' view, while distancing herself from it, even though she was currently without work as a lone parent:

*Respondent:*

*No, there's a lot of families on benefits that can't be bothered to work but there is people living on the West Marsh that do go to work and they have got nice houses and pay their way, it's not just all. Some estates you get they are just all full of people on benefits and living off the council. I can't say nothing, I'm one of 'em at the minute.*

Clearly, respondents in some case study areas subscribed to the notion of a 'culture of worklessness', albeit not expressed in those terms. These accounts are hard to corroborate as they tend to consist of reflections by those in work regarding unnamed others maligned for their dependency on benefits and reluctance to find work. Nonetheless, it indicates that stigmatising discourses of worklessness that emphasise a cultural propensity to shun work do have some purchase in these relatively deprived neighbourhoods. These perceptions contrast sharply, however, with the accounts of those out of work cited above who emphasise their willingness to work and their frustration at their lack of success in securing employment despite persistent jobsearch efforts. Yet, this image of the frustrated jobseeker is not the one that appears to have taken hold in the imaginations of many living in deprived neighbourhoods. It is interesting to note that official policy statements also tend to focus on the lack of motivation among the workless, with an avowed commitment to get 'tough' on those 'playing the system' (DWP, 2008a). Some consideration perhaps needs to be paid to the effect of such discourses in deprived neighbourhoods where, as the evidence

shows, sharp social divides exist, with those in work showing little sympathy for their workless neighbours.

One final observation on the impact of the current economic downturn is that, in a small number of cases, there was evidence of a somewhat laconic response from those living in disadvantaged areas who considered this kind of precariousness a feature of everyday working life at any point in the economic cycle:

*Interviewer:*

*What has been the impact of the recession?*

*Respondent:*

*I don't think it has had that much effect.*

*Interviewer:*

*Why's that then?*

*Respondent:*

*There's not much wealth here anyway.*  
(Amlwch)

*Respondent:*

*Yeah we always have a credit crunch anyway, we've had it every year for every day of our lives since we've been married or whatever. So it's no different for us, if you're a low-income worker. So it's no different from every other day.*  
(Oxgangs)

For these individuals, insecurity and low wages are an endemic feature of work in the lower end of the labour market. The recession was therefore perceived to be making little tangible difference to the conditions they were likely to face in employment.

## Conclusion

These findings in relation to work raise a number of issues concerning policies to tackle worklessness. First, many accounts appear to challenge the supply-side insistence that worklessness is related primarily to a skills or motivation deficit rather than to an underlying lack of labour demand, which

is now being overtaken in any event by rapidly deteriorating economic conditions. While it is difficult to extrapolate from qualitative accounts to reflect on conditions within complex and geographically broad labour markets, there was certainly evidence that workless interviewees felt that a lack of jobs constituted a major barrier to work. Second, the evident determination of many of those searching for work tends to challenge the notion that worklessness is often a reflection of the lack of willingness or motivation of the workless to compete for employment. Yet official policy documents and statements continue to focus on getting 'tough' on those 'playing the system' (DWP, 2008a) with little recognition of the commitment of many of those out of work to find employment in challenging labour market conditions. Third, the moral justification for enforcing 'rights and responsibilities' through conditionality is weakened if the worklessness is regarded to be, to some degree, a function of a shortage of jobs. This is particularly the case for the most marginalised jobseekers at the 'back of the queue for jobs' (Beatty and Fothergill, 2003, p. 129) who are more likely to face employer discrimination in weak labour markets.

Overall, the evidence supports the view that the Government needs to switch emphasis from the supply-side focus on individual employability to consider measures that stimulate employment. The Future Jobs Fund is a step in the right direction in this respect, but it remains a short-term measure targeting young people at risk of long-term unemployment. This suggests there is scope for longer-term interventions that seek to generate employment opportunities for a broader segment of the workless population. Indeed, some of the UK's most prominent economists have already responded to the recession by producing a set of proposals that includes a large-scale Keynesian-style fiscal stimulus to create jobs (Bell and Blanchflower, 2009). This is not to imply that job creation is a straightforward task, given its expense and the tendency of the benefits to 'leak out' of deprived areas (Ritchie *et al.*, 2005, p. 51; North and Syrett, 2006, pp. 41, 78). However the evidence from these interviews suggests that, at the very least, a debate is overdue about how demand-side measures might play a greater role in strategies for tackling worklessness.

# 4 Job quality and the experience of work

## Policy assumption

Government policy centres on claims that work delivers a number of social and economic benefits to individuals.

## Key messages from the research

- There is evidence from this research to support the notion that employment can contribute to self-esteem and a sense of independence as well as provide valued social interaction.
- However, it is equally the case that many of the research respondents are trapped in ‘*poor work*’ characterised by combinations of low pay, long hours or pervasive job insecurity as they cycle between employment and worklessness.
- Many of those out of work also remain to be convinced of the financial benefits of entering the formal labour market; there is a widespread perception that work does not always pay.

## Policy implications

Policy-makers need to focus more on improving the quality of available jobs in relation to pay, conditions and the longer-term potential for progression in work; this includes placing responsibilities on employers to provide attractive employment opportunities.

The Government’s policies on tackling worklessness are underpinned by claims relating to the emotional and financial benefits of work. For example, the most recent Green Paper on welfare reform – *No One Written Off* (DWP, 2008c) – asserts that work can deliver a multitude of social and economic benefits, both to individuals and their wider communities:

*Paid work is the route to independence, health and well-being for most people. Work promotes choice, supports an inclusive society and increases community cohesion.*

(DWP, 2008c, p. 25)

Work is seen to provide benefits both to individuals and to the communities in which they live. This is further supported through reference to ‘*a compelling body of medical evidence that work generally helps, rather than hinders, health and recovery*’ (DWP, 2008a, p. 66) including Dame Carol Black’s (2008) report *Working for a Healthier Tomorrow*. Overall, the Green Paper is firmly wedded to the notion that work is an essential source of personal enrichment.

This view has been challenged by a number of observers who have expressed concerns about the quality of work that has emerged as a result of economic restructuring over the last three decades. One consequence of the decline of traditional industries and manufacturing has been a reduction in reasonably well-paid work for those with limited skills (McDowell, 2003). In its place, the number of low-paid jobs – the ‘*donkey work*’ (Warhurst and Thompson, 1998, p. 5), ‘*junk jobs*’ (Lash, 1994) or ‘*poor work*’ (McDowell, 2003, especially Chapter 2) of the UK economy – has increased over the last 25 years. A recent TUC (2008) report estimated that there are as many as two million ‘*vulnerable workers*’ in ‘*precarious work*’ that is insecure and low-paid. The growing proportion in this group who are agency workers lack entitlement to sick pay, paid holidays and pension contributions that permanent employees enjoy.

Many of the low-skilled jobs created in the period of economic expansion that began in the 1990s and ended in 2008 are not paying enough to support a family, thereby enlarging the category of those who can be classified as ‘*working poor*’ (McDowell, 2003, p. 48; see also UK Parliament,

1999, p. 6; Alcock *et al.*, 2003, p. 243). Indeed, research indicates that six in ten poor households in the UK (57 per cent) have someone in work, demonstrating that '*[w]hile work is undoubtedly the surest route out of poverty, it is far from an inevitable one*' (Cooke and Lawton, 2008, p. 5). A recent report by the IFS and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Hirsch, 2009) suggests that the recession is unlikely to change the rate of child poverty trends to any significant extent by 2010. This is because rising levels of out-of-work poverty will be cancelled out by the greater increases in real terms of the value of in-work tax credits relative to the rise in median earnings. However, it does increase the cost of tackling child poverty, as more families are likely to be workless.

Our research found that work was indeed important to residents for many of the reasons cited by policy-makers. A number of people expressed the view that it had benefits beyond financial rewards, including the following respondent from Amlwch:

*Respondent:*

*I enjoy working, I couldn't sit in the house all day watching telly, that's not me, there's only so much you can do in the house, painting and stuff so, no, I enjoy work.*

In this case, there was a clear sense that work provided meaningful and purposeful activity, corroborating much of the social scientific literature on the importance of employment in individuals' lives (see, for example, Jahoda *et al.*, 1972). Work also appeared to fulfil important social needs in terms of valued interactions with others. One self-employed resident in Amlwch who runs fishing trips using his own boat explained the sense of camaraderie that had developed between himself and other local residents based on the mutual dependencies that arise from working in this environment:

*Respondent:*

*It's just a thing with the sea isn't it? You've towed half of them in and if anyone's in trouble you go and get 'em and there's a certain comradeship because we work on the boats.*

Another interviewee who worked three days a week explained some of the social benefits she derived from her role:

*Respondent:*

*It's mostly elderly folk that are maybe alone or need to get out so we pick them up and take them to centres and have coffee and then play dominoes or whatever they want to do we do in the day ... And that's great fun. They tell you some stories ... I get a laugh out of it, I can be feeling really rotten one day, go into work that day and you come out laughing. I've seen me come out sometimes crying with laughter with tears running down my face, that's the buzz I can get.*

Work was also cited as a source of financial independence, as in the case of these two female residents from Oxfgangs:

*Respondent 1:*

*Yeah it's important to have a job and to get me independence and provide for me kids.*

*Respondent 2:*

*Oh yeah I couldn't not work. What are you here for if you don't go out and have a bit of respect and earn a living, just to have money in your pocket to call your own and be able to buy stuff that you want to buy.*

The value and meaning attached to work was also illustrated in the reflections of those without employment. One respondent in Blackburn explained the negative financial and emotional impact of not being in work:

*Respondent:*

*[Work is] very important because you can't make ends meet without work, you just can't survive without work.*

*Interviewer:*

*Do you miss working?*



*Respondent:*

*Yeah a hell of a lot. I even felt good mentally when I was in work, I felt good about myself.*

This reference to feeling ‘good mentally’ supports the view that work can be beneficial for well-being, as claimed in official policy statements and government-backed research (see Black, 2008; DWP, 2008a, p. 25). Conversely, being without work can prove highly corrosive in terms of generating feelings of low self-worth and lack of purpose. This was particularly the case with those unable to work because of health reasons, as the following two cases illustrate. In the first, a young woman from Grimsby explains the effect of enforced inactivity on her epileptic partner, while the second quote concerns a discussion between a married couple in Oxfords about the impact of her husband’s involuntary withdrawal because of health problems:

*Respondent:*

*He’d love to work but he can’t. I don’t think it gets him down because he’s lived it since he’s been 15 year old but sometimes fit, after fit, after fit it’s like, ‘I can’t do this any more’ and there were one night I just couldn’t cope, I just sat here and broke down in tears. I just couldn’t take no more, it does get hard, his fits. He could be walking up into town and he could be down on the floor and he doesn’t know when he’s going to have one.*

*Respondent (wife):*

*If I could change anything it would probably be my husband and I’s health problems so we could go back and work and have the social side of it as well as the financial side, all that. It’s no just a case of you go out and you do your job, it’s a case of what you’re doing in your job and having things to talk about.*

*Interviewer:*

*So the fact that you’re not working, how does that make you feel?*

*Respondent (husband):*

*It makes me feel down and a bit useless sometimes yeah, because they did look into doing other possibilities within my workplace, even from cooking and cleaning and all that type of thing just so that they could keep me on. But obviously, just because of my back, it was a ‘no no’ and it’s the same pretty much with most jobs, I cannae do a lot of things. The hands are fine, the back’s knackered so where does that leave you? You cannae sit too long, you cannae stand too long, all those type of things.*

There is evidence, therefore, to support the Government’s contention that work can be beneficial to health and well-being, while worklessness can inflict a highly damaging social and emotional toll. Indeed, it was notable that only a small minority of interviewees expressed purely instrumental views of work as a source of income with no additional social or emotional benefits. One English man working in a pharmacy in Amlwch was negative about the benefits of employment, largely because of his perceived sense of exclusion as a non-Welsh speaker:

*Respondent:*

*The only reason you do it is income, because I work in the pharmacy and I feel I am persecuted because I am English ... people getting [promotions] before I get a look in, [there’s a lot] of Welshism with people from Amlwch.*

Yet these frustrations were directed at the experience of working in a labour market that was unique among the case studies because of the bilingualism expected by most employers. This was less an outright rejection of work per se than a personal sense of grievance at perceived discrimination. Overall, most interviewees could identify positive elements of work.

Despite this ability to associate work with economic and social benefits, it was striking from the research that many working residents were trapped in low-skilled manual or service jobs with onerous conditions. Low pay, long or unsocial hours and job insecurity seemed associated with

much of the work undertaken by interviewees. This was particularly evident in the more isolated, less buoyant labour markets in Amlwch, Blackburn and Grimsby, although, as the following example shows, it also affected some of those living London. In this case, a young unemployed female with previous experience of bar work living in West Kensington explained the difficulties she faced in securing reasonably paid work:

*Respondent:*

*I am looking for a job but it's harder to get a job now.*

*Interviewer:*

*What sort of thing are you looking for?*

*Respondent:*

*Bar work you know, just something local, not miles and miles away cos I live here, bar work money's not that good anyway so, by the time you've paid for buses and trains and that, you'd have to be in your area, walking distance.*

*Interviewer:*

*What kind of money would they pay for bar work?*

*Respondent:*

*I think it's £5.35<sup>1</sup> or something, bad money.*

Evidently, the low pay on offer and cost of public transport restricted the scope of her jobsearch, reflecting Green and Owen's (2006, p. ix) observation that '*geography matters most for those with low skills*'.

One consequence of low pay is the need to work long hours in order to be able to sustain a reasonable standard of living. This is exemplified by the account of a young male worker from Portugal living in Grimsby who explained how some weeks he works very long hours:

*Respondent:*

*[Last week it] was 68 [hours].*

*Interviewer:*

*That's almost two weeks' work, when you think a basic week is 35 hours isn't it?*

*Respondent:*

*Yeah, but it's like I spoke with you on the phone, that we buy a house and we needed to buy all the furniture, so we need, after that we can come down a bit, but [not] in the beginning.*

For two self-employed male taxi drivers, low pay combined with the decline in custom in the wake of the recession has also forced them to work longer hours to make ends meet:

*Respondent 1:*

*Yeah I had to change the office I was working for and do a flexi shift as well, I've always done eight hours a day before, I do a lot more hours now to get by with.*  
(Blackburn)

*Respondent 2:*

*[Talking about partner] It's definitely impacted on [him], not so much on me because I'm on a fixed wage but certainly he's finding it very difficult and very hard to get motivated to go out and trawl the streets. People aren't going out at the moment, people might say it's not affecting them in such a way but it certainly is impacting on us because he does rely on people going out to earn his money. People aren't doing that at the moment.*  
(Oxgangs)

Another consequence of low pay for one respondent from Amlwch was the need to combine two jobs in order to get by financially:

*Interviewer:*

*So you work full-time and then work in a pub in an evening as well?*

*Respondent:*

*Yeah about three nights a week.*

<sup>1</sup> This is presumably a reference to the National Minimum Wage which was £5.52 for adults aged over 22 at the time of interview (March 2008).

*Interviewer:*  
*Why do you do that then?*

*Respondent:*  
*Because I don't earn enough.*

Several respondents also topped up their wages with informal economic activity, as in the two examples below:

*Interviewer:*  
*You mentioned cash in hand, and again I stress this is confidential. Is this one way of coping is to do cash-in-hand work?*

*Respondent:*  
*Yeah, I think it's socially acceptable round here to do that sort of thing, you know? Nobody'd think bad of you cos you have to ...*

*Interviewer:*  
*How often would you do that then?*  
*Respondent:* *Well, I've been working for – can I tell you who I've been working [for]? ... I've been working at a firm recently, so. It's about £50 a day or something ... My father's got a building business as well, so, if I need anything, yeah, I can work it off, my debts and stuff.*

*Interviewer:*  
*Is that the only way realistically somebody in your position could get a house [by doing informal work]?*

*Respondent*  
*Jobs round here, yeah, with the pay I'm on. On Minimum Wage, my basic week is £186 take home. That's after work, doing the overtime and the DJing. The DJing isn't legit, that's cash in hand. But the overtime is ... I earn £33 an hour there.*

*Interviewer:*  
*Do a lot of people do that?*

*Respondent:*  
*Yeah, oh yeah.*

Not all respondents considered informal working acceptable, however, as the following comments by a respondent in Blackburn highlighted:

*Interviewer:*  
*... cash-in-hand work, is that something you've ever contemplated?*

*Respondent:*  
*No.*

*Interviewer:*  
*Is there a reason why not?*

*Respondent:*  
*Because it's wrong, because I don't have the energy most days and I manage with what I get, even in those times I wouldn't have been compelled to go down that road. I think it's a funny one is that, I would be one of the people, if somebody else was doing it, would turn a blind eye because everybody does what they need to do to get by and I certainly wouldn't be dropping somebody in it; but I don't agree with it, it goes totally against the grain. It's like paying your TV licence or anything isn't it? If you're avoiding something it just puts the pressure on everybody else and it's not taking responsibility for your own actions.*

In view of the 'hidden' nature of informal work, it is not perhaps not surprising that a review of studies of informal work concluded that there is a 'lack of robust evidence about the extent of the informal economy in deprived areas and its effects on levels of formal unemployment' (Sanderson, 2006, p. 49). While accepting this position, a recent review of the evidence produced for Communities and Local Government (CLG) nevertheless claimed it was an 'important and growing element of society' (CEEDR, 2006, p. 86). It is difficult to comment on this as it certainly did not seem a widespread practice across case studies. Nonetheless, where residents did engage in such activities, it tended to be regarded as a supplement or alternative to low-wage work. This suggests, in line with other studies, that informal work is a mechanism that can enable people to manage and survive in low-income neighbourhoods (North and Syrett, 2006,

p. 23). In particular, it appears to corroborate Katungi *et al.*'s (2006) study of 100 individuals engaged in informal work in Newham, London, which concluded that people in deprived areas tend to work informally in response to poverty – 'out of need, not greed'.

The evidence of residents working very long hours or combining more than one job, legitimate or otherwise, indicates the difficulties that those in low-paid work face in managing financially. These findings reflect separate observations in a recent study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Hirsh *et al.*, 2009) about the inability of minimum wage employment to sustain households. The report identified a 'minimum income standard' based on what members of the public thought was the minimum annual income people needed to achieve a socially acceptable standard of living (£13,900 a year before tax in 2009 for a single person and £27,600 for a couple with children). The research showed that neither household type can achieve that minimum income standard with one member of the household working full-time on the Minimum Wage (£5.73 an hour). As our study indicates, this shortfall is often made up through excessively long hours or a reliance on more than one job.

Another implication of low pay for those not in employment is that it can render a return to work financially untenable for those facing additional costs such as public transport. One workless interviewee in Blackburn had recently left a job in a food production factory in nearby Preston because of the prohibitive cost as well as the time involved in travelling to work:

*Respondent:*

*I actually got work there [in Preston] but it didn't work out worthwhile. I had to change two buses just to get there and that came to three hours.*

*Interviewer:*

*What type of work was it?*

*Respondent:*

*Roasting chicken and making samosas, it's mainly frozen food ... it didn't work out worthwhile for me ... Not at all, in fact I had to spend more money out of my own pocket to do that work.*

Indeed, for some in work, the low pay on offer meant the decision to work was based on perceived social and moral benefits, particularly in terms of setting an example for children, rather than on any expectation of financial gain. One female lone parent working in Grimsby explained, for example, how:

*Respondent:*

*I do struggle now, I work 16 hours when I'm actually £1.02 a week better off ... Which is really scary, it's madness. But the only reason I work is for me personally and for the kids, so I can say, 'Look, mum goes to work every week, we all have to work' ... which is the only reason. I don't do it financially at all ... and I love it and whatever but financially it's certainly not the reason.*

Aside from low pay and long hours, another negative aspect of work concerned the unsocial hours associated with shift work, as this factory worker in Grimsby observed:

*Respondent:*

*[I do] six to two one week, two to ten the next and then ten to six just continuous like that.*

*Interviewer:*

*And which shifts do you like?*

*Respondent:*

*Or which do you hate really. Nights, I don't like it cos I don't really get no sleep cos you try to sleep in the daytime and it's cars up and down the street all the time and things like that but I like the shift because it's better, there's hardly owt to do. Six to two I like because I finish at two in the afternoon, I've got the rest of the day to myself although I don't like getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning. And then there's two in the afternoon till ten at night, it feels like in the morning you're just waiting around to go to work so I can't win either way.*



These observations on low pay, long hours and unsocial shifts put a different perspective on arguments about the financial and social benefits of paid employment. This is starkly illustrated in one case in Amlwch where the combination of low pay, long hours and sense of exploitation was identified as contributing directly to a deterioration in mental health, which eventually forced the young man concerned to leave his job working for a turf-laying firm:

*Respondent:*

*I left [the company] last summer because the stress got to me, the big hours and all that ... I was going to start jobs very early in the morning, I'd had enough. I was taken ill really, I was on antidepressants for a bit, I couldn't cope any more ... Long hours and we weren't getting proper breaks there, just make money for the bosses, just work, work, work.*

This case illustrates that, contrary to claims made in the welfare reform White Paper (DWP, 2008a) that work has positive effects on health and well-being, it can also have a damaging impact in an exploitative work environment. As noted in a government-commissioned review of the evidence of the impact of work on health, employment is generally positive for individuals but with the important proviso that '*Beneficial health effects depend on the nature and quality of work*' (Waddell and Burton, 2006, p. ix). Given that the evidence from this research suggests that poor terms and conditions are an intrinsic feature of working in the lower end of the labour market, particularly in the more isolated and less buoyant local economies of Grimsby, Blackburn and Amlwch, one needs to be rather more measured about the potential benefits of work. For significant numbers of individuals living in deprived areas whose employment is restricted to low-skilled, low-waged work, the assumed benefits of work may be far less evident.

One final difficulty identified with low-skilled work was the inherent insecurity of such employment. This was sometimes connected with the use of private employment agencies, which, in the following example from Grimsby, failed to provide sufficient work to generate a steady, reliable income:

*Respondent:*

*We first started when we moved over here, we registered with all agencies, they kept saying 'we've got you loads of work'. It were brilliant one day and that's it. Next day we'd get a phone call, 'no work today, no work today', so then I was supposed to pay rent on one day's wage, 'but it's going to pick up next week' and every single one said exactly same, so it were a nightmare.*

This illustrates how a reliance on irregular agency work can lock individuals into a 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' (McKnight, 2005) with intermittent spells in employment interspersed with periods on benefit. These unstable labour market careers are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, which considers issues relating to progression in work. Indeed, the apparent insecurities attached to certain forms of employment lead some interviewees to regard benefit as a more reliable income stream, as reflected in the remarks of one respondent from Blackburn claiming Incapacity Benefit:

*Respondent:*

*At the moment I know I'm on the sick, I know I've got that money coming in every month. If I were working I'd be even more stressed because I'd be thinking, 'have I got me job next week? Might be out of work'. A lot of people must think that as well, have they still got a job to go to?*

This illustrates how perceptions of the contingent nature of work can increase reliance on benefits. The prospect of an irregular income can act as a deterrent to contemplating a return to work.

## Conclusion

These findings on the experience of work and, in particular, concerns over the quality of work raise a number of issues relevant to current and future policy. Many interviewees were able to identify a number of non-monetary benefits of work, including a sense of purpose and independence, self-esteem and valued social interaction. This supports the claims made about the potential

social benefits of employment for individuals by policy-makers. But it was equally clear work did not *necessarily* deliver such benefits, with numerous interviewees also highlighting the onerous conditions in which they worked.

This presents significant challenges to policy orthodoxies. In financial terms, it may remain true that worklessness increases the '*risk of poverty*' (DWP, 2008a, p. 65), but it does not follow that entering employment entirely negates that risk. For many interviewees, in-work poverty was a feature of their working lives, sometimes forcing them to work longer hours or combine jobs to make up for the inadequacies of minimum-wage employment. In line with Hirsh *et al.*'s (2009) research on a minimum income, this research suggests that government policies have still not managed to '*make work pay*' for everyone ten years after the introduction of the National Minimum Wage.

Moreover, it is not always evident that low-paid, low-skilled work will deliver the emotional and psychological benefits such as '*independence, health and well-being*' (DWP, 2008c, p. 25) associated with employment in the Green Paper, particularly if it involves some combination of low pay, long or unsocial hours or pervasive insecurity. '*Poor work*' is a label that could be applied to a lot of the employment held by residents living in relatively deprived neighbourhoods. This seemed particularly applicable to those living in neighbourhoods located in the less buoyant labour markets that characterised Blackburn, Grimsby and Amlwch. In view of such findings, it is significant that issues of job quality continue to remain low on the political agenda compared to the 'work-first' (Peck and Theodore, 2000) imperative of getting people into employment. It is notable, for example, that the '*responsibilities*' placed on jobseekers to look for work are not extended to employers in terms of expectations of delivering, as far as possible, attractive forms of work. This seems like a missed opportunity. If the Government is willing to fund the education, training and personal development necessary to make jobseekers attractive to employers, it would seem equally reasonable to expect all employers to provide good-quality vacancies in return. Without this, the potential benefits of work to personal health and well-being will remain elusive to many of the more marginalised workers trapped

in low-skilled, low-wage work at the bottom end of the labour market.

# 5 The impact of work on family life

## Policy assumption

Employment policy is based on the claim that work is beneficial to family life.

## Key messages from the research

- A number of respondents identified tensions between work and parenting; these included the inability of low-paid work to support childcare costs and the lack of flexibility within some employment necessary to fulfil parenting responsibilities.
- There was also a marked reluctance to use formal childcare, for both moral and financial reasons, with a preference for using close family as carers.

## Policy implications

- These findings have significant implications for a childcare policy currently centred on boosting the number of formal childcare places; they suggest equal focus might need to be given to meeting childcare costs and providing 'family-friendly' employment with hours to fit around parenting commitments.
- There is also a need for a more open policy debate on the appropriate balance between parenting responsibilities and work.

The assumption that work has positive benefits for family life has been a persistent theme in the Government's approach, as in the Freud (2007) report on which much of the present round of welfare reform is predicated:

*Governments have in the past shown a reluctance to engage with those furthest*

*from the labour market. But the evidence is now overwhelming that employment is generally beneficial for individuals and their families. Far from being reluctant to engage, the Government could on this evidence be accused of dereliction if it were to fail to do so.*  
(Freud, 2007, p. 45)

Accordingly, the Government has sought to increase the number of formal childcare places in order to make it easier for those with young children to return to work. As part of the Childcare Strategy outlined in *Next Steps for Early Learning and Childcare* (HMG, 2009b), the Government has made childcare available through the offer of a free early learning place to almost all children aged 3 and 4, with additional capacity made available in disadvantaged areas through 3,000 Sure Start Children's Centres. Under current plans, free early learning will be made available to disadvantaged 2 year olds and will be extended, stage by stage, to all 2-year-old children.

Some of the assumptions underpinning policies towards families, parenting and work were, however, challenged by the accounts of interviewees. In contrast to claims made about the benefits of work to family life, for example, some respondents appeared to struggle to balance a job with looking after young children. One young mother in Knowsley, for example, gave up work because of the difficulties it created:

*Respondent:*

*I've just left work actually with the kids and childcare, but I was a catering assistant in a home up the top of the road, you know the care homes, I worked there for seven years.*

*Interviewer:*

*And was that part-time?*

*Respondent:*  
*Full-time, it started off part-time and then I went to college and then came full-time.*

*Interviewer:*  
*So you've stopped work now to care for the children?*

*Respondent:*  
*Yeah childcare and working just wasn't working with having him.*

Another respondent in Blackburn felt that looking after young children was irreconcilable with her ambition of opening her own shop, because of the practical and financial difficulties involved:

*Respondent:*  
*I went to the Blackburn and Darwen Enterprise [service], but I couldn't make an appointment because of the little one ... so I thought, 'well, if I can't make appointments now, it's pointless trying to start up my own business, if I can't find a babysitter for an hour for an appointment' ... so I'm just waiting.*

*Interviewer:*  
*Do you think you'll wait until they go to school?*

*Respondent:*  
*I think so and I'd rather wait it out, do it that way. Silly as it may sound. It is a struggle at the minute but I've just got to wait, be patient.*

*Interviewer:*  
*So do you miss work?*

*Respondent:*  
*I do. I do miss working. I miss the fact, I don't know, it's of being busy in the day and earning money, doing extra work just to get something that you want, it's as simple as that but when you've got kids it's not that simple, you can't do extra work to get things that you want ... and, if I do, I only get part of my childcare paid for and*

*then I've got to pay for the rest of it so I'm better off where I am as it is, it's hard.*

A particular concern of parents without work was finding employment that would fit in around parenting responsibilities. One workless couple living in Grimsby expressed a desire to return to work, but noted that this would either involve unsocial hours or work that paid little more than benefits:

*Respondent 1 (male):*  
*Yeah I can get myself back to work [but you can't work part-time and get what we get [on benefits] ... like my friend, his missus worked part-time and they're actually better off once she gave it up ... There's no incentive to go to work.*

*Respondent 2 (female):*  
*To start off with I'd have to work nights ... so I'm here to take them to school and pick them up ...*

*Respondent 1 (male):*  
*or work weekends, which means we don't get no time together with the kids.*

These quotes all highlight difficulties in balancing the financial costs and demands on time imposed by work with fulfilling parental responsibilities. Clearly, employment is not always seen as beneficial to family life.

One prominent finding from the research was a widespread reluctance to use formal childcare. In some cases this was driven by a moral conviction of the importance of parenting, as evidenced in the following two examples. In the first case, a woman in Amlwch who works as a part-time cleaner at a school explained how she always sought work with hours that ensured she did not need to rely on childcare:

*Respondent:*  
*I've always worked on and off and I had to fit it in, I've got a 9-year-old daughter so I have to fit it with her being in school and then thinking about the school holidays,*

*make sure I've got arrangements for that, but I've applied for jobs ... working from home because then I could still be with her because I don't believe in just leaving her or sending her to childminders ... I'm all right with childminders but ... I want to be the main part of her life and she can look back in years and 'yeah me mum was there' like my mum was there for us.*

Similarly, one interviewee in Grimsby, who actually works as a nursery nurse in a local childcare centre, expressed her reservations about entrusting the care of her children to others:

*Respondent:*

*In theory I think it's a fantastic idea but, as a single mum, it is really tough to get a job that fits in round your school day and I don't think any mum should be forced to put their kids into childcare. I know they help with childcare financially cos you can get up to 75 per cent now can't you, 80 per cent childcare costs, which is fabulous, but you might not want that. I personally don't like my kids in childcare ... I don't particularly like it and that's nothing about the childcare, I wouldn't take a job that I had to work in the holidays because I just don't agree with it, I don't like it. My mum was always at home for me, get in and there was tea on the table, my mum didn't work when we were little and I think, in the holidays, I'd want to be home and stuff like that and I don't think any parent should be forced to get a job where they're taking their kids to a breakfast club. I mean, I've got friends that do it, drop the kids off at quarter to 8.00 in the morning and the kids go to breakfast club. Somebody takes the kids from school and they're picking the kids up at 6 o'clock at night, it's a long day for any child, it's a long day for an adult, they're doing the same hours as you. There's kids from 3 months old doing that, I think it's wrong. I know there's some parents that choose to do that but I don't think you should ever be forced to do that and I think the working structure, if they*

*want single mums to get back into work, the working structure needs to be looked at, as in trying to find jobs that fit round school.*

Here, a complex set of factors, including the cultural values inculcated through the respondent's upbringing and her observations as a nursery nurse, combine to produce a moral conviction that children should not be looked after for the length of an adult working day. This results in her determination not to work outside of school hours. Indeed, she is forthright in her views on government proposals to make almost all lone parents seek work, believing this can be justified only if this can accommodate parenting duties.

Finding flexible work that fitted around school hours often seemed difficult. One interviewee's account of securing the hours she wanted in a factory in Grimsby highlights the intense competition that existed for shifts that accommodated parenting responsibilities:

*Respondent:*

*I was lucky with the agency that I got in with, I think they knew I needed certain hours, they knew I was always going to be there with timekeeping and everything ... I think they worked me in gradually, see what I was capable of and then got me in. I was lucky really, especially to get on the ten to two shift cos six months or a year before I started with the agency there was a five-year waiting list for that shift. I just sailed straight through so I was really, really lucky.*

Alongside these moral concerns, some non-working parents felt that the potential cost of childcare could preclude a return to work. In Amlwch, one young mother explained how:

*Respondent:*

*I'm at home at the moment with the baby, I've not gone back to work cos of money really, with childcare and one thing and another.*

*Interviewer:*

*It makes more sense not to go back to work then?*



*Respondent:*

*Well, yes, I would like to go back to work but it's not really practical at the moment. So I stay at home and obviously my husband works full-time ... Well, cos [if] I work in Bangor, by the time I get back and forth there every day, and the childcare is £23 a day, it wasn't really [worth it] you know?*

In this case, the potential costs of childcare combined with the transport costs of accessing work outside Amlwch acted as a financial disincentive to return to work. Indeed, transport often emerged as an additional cost in considering a return to work for residents of Amlwch because of its relative isolation from the main centres of employment. The geography of employment opportunity is clearly another factor that can mean that work does not always pay.

In thinking about the cost of childcare as a potential disincentive to seeking employment, it is difficult to determine exactly how interviewees would be affected financially by a return to work. While low-income parents are eligible for up to 80 per cent of childcare costs through the tax credit system, some potential beneficiaries may be unclear about their precise entitlements. Evidence from other research suggests, for example, that workless people are not well informed about the availability of Working Tax Credit, Childcare Tax Credit, Housing Benefit and other forms of in-work support (Fletcher *et al.*, 2008, p. 59; Meadows, 2008, p. 12). Nonetheless, it is clear that perceptions of the potential costs of childcare can function as a disincentive to returning to work.

A common solution to the reluctance to use formal childcare was to rely on close family to look after children. One respondent on maternity leave in Amlwch reflected, for example, how she was more likely to use family than childcare because of the costs associated with the latter:

*Respondent:*

*Well my maternity ends in August so after August I'll be in work.*

*Interviewer:*

*And how will you work childcare?*

*Respondent:*

*I'm not quite sure at the moment, I've got, my mum's at home, my mum doesn't work ... My sister's another option, she's got two kids, one's younger than [mine], she's another option, about six miles away again or there's a crèche, there's one just down from the hospital or there's one in the hospital, then again you're talking about working a day to pay for the childcare and I don't think there's much point in doing that.*

For those already in work, family often provided valuable support in looking after children:

*Interviewer:*

*Was childcare an issue with your work as well?*

*Respondent:*

*I was really fortunate because my partner's mum has been pretty much the sole [carer].*

(Oxgangs)

*Respondent:*

*My mum helped out watching the kids, because I'd work at night because, by that time, they were in their beds and so she would watch the kids for me at night.*

(Oxgangs)

In the latter case, a reliance on family might also have a pragmatic element, as formal childcare is not available to cover such shifts. Some low-skilled workers who were dependent on employment with non-standard hours might, therefore, be compelled to use family as a source of informal childcare.

## Conclusion

The research illustrates how the experiences and perceptions of both work and parenting represent challenges to the Government's assumptions about the benefits of work for families. While some households might benefit emotionally or financially if parents worked, this is far from inevitable. The

nature of employment available in the lower end of the labour market means that work is often inadequately paid to meet childcare costs, even after tax credits are taken into account, or is insufficiently flexible to accommodate parenting responsibilities. Employment can impose financial burdens on families as well as demand hours that, from the perspective of some parents, infringe on the quality of family life. There is, therefore, a genuine tension between work and parenting that receives little recognition in policy formulations focused on maximising the numbers of parents in work.

Evidently it is welcome that the Government has taken steps to reduce the childcare costs through the tax credit system. Without this, childcare would be completely unaffordable for many of the low-wage workers profiled here. Nonetheless, some interviewees felt that the potential costs of childcare precluded a return to work. This could be a consequence of failing to understand the financial support available on returning to work, but, equally, it could reflect the low pay on offer and the difficulties that this imposes in meeting the costs of even heavily subsidised childcare. Once again, this raises issues about the extent to which work always pays, especially for families on low incomes, and further puts the responsibility of employers under the spotlight. While the Government has been active in funding or subsidising childcare, it is notable that there has been perhaps less pressure to ensure employers provide sufficiently well paid or flexible work. As the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) observed in its response to the welfare reform Green Paper, employers are the “*black hole*’ in ensuring that no-one is written off” (CPAG, 2008):

*The green paper gives great attention to increasing individual responsibility but ignores the responsibilities of employers to open up access to decent jobs. Poorly paid jobs and inflexible employers do nothing to support moves back into employment and may undermine family life. Bad employers must now be the urgent target for welfare reform.*

(CPAG, 2008)

As with concerns over the quality of work highlighted in the last chapter, there is some evidence that it is the terms and conditions offered by employers that make it difficult for individuals to secure and sustain employment that is compatible with their family’s needs. This suggests that the Government needs to place corporate responsibility at the heart of welfare reform.

One final observation is that there is a marked reluctance among low-income workers to use formal childcare for both financial and moral reasons. Close family is often the preferred source of support. This means that policies aimed at increasing formal childcare places may bypass some families, with the result that the time pressures and any financial costs attached to informal childcare may be shouldered without state support. The recent decision announced in the 2009 Budget to award national insurance credits to grandparents looking after grandchildren to avoid a future pension shortfall shows that the Government is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of this kind of informal care. But there is perhaps more that could be done both to understand the scale of informal childcare and to support it through policy interventions, given the critical role it appears to play in enabling some parents to return to work.

# 6 Skills, training and progression in work

## Policy assumption

Government policy on skills and employment rests on the notion that training and education can provide workers with the skills to progress in work and to avoid becoming trapped in low-wage, low-paid employment.

## Key messages from the research

- Our research revealed a number of cases where interviewees lacked opportunities for progression in their current jobs or experienced downward occupational mobility during their working lives; this was sometimes associated with a 'low-pay, no-pay' dynamic where unstable employment was interspersed with spells of worklessness.
- The research also found, however, that poverty and parenting responsibilities can restrict opportunities for retraining or returning to education as the basis for entering or progressing in work.

## Policy implications

- Social and occupational mobility remains a worthy policy objective, but there are considerable barriers to acquiring and capitalising on skills.
- Flexible and innovative skills development programmes may help reduce some of these barriers for certain individuals, but others will continue to find it difficult to acquire skills that help them to move out of the lower end of the labour market.
- More immediate benefits may be realised, therefore, by improving the terms and

conditions associated with the low-skilled, low-paid employment that dominates the working lives of many of those living in the least buoyant labour markets.

The recent Green Paper expressed a commitment to support people without work to embark on employment pathways in which they could gain new skills that increase opportunities for occupational mobility. It states that:

*... [o]ur customers should – and do – aspire to more than low-skilled, low-paid jobs. More and more opportunities are available in higher skill sectors so we are reforming the system to make it easier for people to access and benefit from skills development.*

(DWP, 2008c, p. 118)

This is to be achieved, in part, through the development of the Work Skills agenda (see DWP and DIUS, 2008), which will trial joint commissioning approaches that bring together the Learning and Skills Council's resources with those of the Department for Work and Pensions's (DWP's) Flexible New Deal. The intention is to remove the confusion caused by the current separation of services for those looking for work and those looking to develop skills and engage in training. More recently, the Government reaffirmed this commitment to provide training and education to help workers avoid becoming trapped in 'low-paid jobs' (HMG, 2009a, p. 68) in the New Opportunities White Paper on social mobility.

The accounts of research participants tend to confirm the Government's view that entry into low-paid work can hinder progression in work, as in the case of one lone parent working in a factory in Grimsby:

*Respondent:*

*I know it's only a factory and it's not much*



*of a ladder there ... I got quite good grades when I was at school but obviously my children come and I've gone back to the factory sort of thing.*

In this example, the need to find work that fitted around her parenting duties reduced the possibilities for capitalising on formal qualifications, thereby locking the respondent into work that provided few opportunities for progression.

For other residents interviewed, progression was denied less through immobility within a particular job but more through mobility via a series of low-paid, low-skilled jobs combined with spells of worklessness in a 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' (McKnight, 2002). One clear example of this turbulent labour market dynamic is offered by the case of a young man in Amlwch who, on losing a long-term but poorly paid job with a turf-laying firm, cycled through a succession of insecure and low-skilled jobs:

*Interviewer:*

*So you finished with [the turf-laying firm] last summer, what happened after that then?*

*Respondent:*

*[I got] another job straight away, I helped out with the hotel, then, painting, general handyman, did that for four, five weeks. I [got another job] and that was a delivery driver, that was nationwide, I was up in Inverness, down in Cornwall, everywhere. That came to an end over Christmas ... [they] went bankrupt, the recession hit them pretty bad.*

*Interviewer:*

*What did you do after that?*

*Respondent:*

*I took a week off and then I went to the [hotel] again, painting, decorating, all that.*

*Interviewer:*

*Was that enough income coming in, enough work for you to make ends meet?*

*Respondent:*

*No, luckily my girlfriend lives with me so she's helping out a lot there, that literally was pocket money there ...*

*Interviewer:*

*So you stayed there until you got this job then?*

*Respondent:*

*Well I was in the [hotel] and a friend of mine works for the caravans and he just asked one day, 'do you fancy a job?'*

In this instance, 'low pay' rather than 'no pay' dominated the interviewee's employment trajectory as he cycled through a succession of low-paid jobs, with some paying poverty-level wages, which meant he could only get by financially with the additional income provided by his partner.

Some interviewees also spoke of downward mobility in their working lives. One woman interviewed in Blackburn explained, for example, how her husband had felt obliged to quit his job as an upholsterer and began working as a taxi driver on night shifts so that he could ensure he was available to take the children to school:

*Respondent:*

*He was an upholsterer for a good ten years, that was a good job, and he became quite a professional, he was saying, 'if I had a bit of money I'd do my own little business', but cos family's, putting his own family [first] ... has limited him to go further in anything. He used to go to college but again the hours that he had to do at work and then go to college, he opted out of college but he's in a job that he doesn't really want to, taxi wasn't a job that he was really keen on doing, he's doing it because it's some money at least ... he's only gone onto night shift work cos it's, his responsibilities are dropping the kids off at school and bringing them back.*

Again, this shows how family commitments can limit employment prospects. In other instances, slack conditions in the local labour market were perceived to exert downward pressures on occupational mobility. One male interviewee in

Blackburn who finally found work as a joiner after a spell of unemployment recalled how he had considered lowering his expectations in view of the shortage of available work:

*Respondent:*

*At the very end [of being out of work] ... I had me name down at four agencies on the web and then I was looking at the Jobcentre and then I was starting to look at different jobs then like carers cos I know a couple of lads that work in trade jobs and they came out and went as carers. The money went down by half but at least it was a job. I was thinking about that.*

While the respondent considered himself fortunate eventually to find work as a joiner that was commensurate with former levels of pay and skill, his former workmates clearly experienced downward mobility in moving into the caring profession. This shows how the limited availability of work in less buoyant labour markets like Blackburn can contribute to downward occupational mobility.

Policy-makers have viewed education or training as potential routes out of low-paid, low-skilled work that offers few opportunities for progression. Several respondents identified barriers to accessing opportunities, however, suggesting that this is often not a straightforward pathway to gaining work or in-work progression. Indeed, many interviewees were cognisant of the potential benefits of gaining formal skills and qualifications, but lacked the financial means to support a return to study or training. As one respondent in Oxgangs observed:

*Respondent:*

*Yeah, if I had the money I'd go back studying, I'd go back to college or uni or something like that, I don't know what to study but I'd definitely do something. My job's, I love my job and I'm good at my job but yeah I wouldn't be there if I had the cash, no danger, it's a means to an end.*

*Interviewer:*

*So you think you'd be able to broaden your horizons?*

*Respondent:*

*Oh definitely I would go back studying without a shadow of a doubt if I had enough money to walk away, well just enough that you would be comfortable and pay everything off and just do what you wanted to. I wouldn't be doing what I do, I would go and do something I wanted to do.*

Another Oxgangs resident also had a serious financial barrier to surmount to achieve her job aspirations because of her status as a dependant on her husband who had UK residency:

*Respondent:*

*I'd like to go back to school, college, but I couldn't do that because I have to be a private student to do that.*

*Interviewer:*

*And what would you like to do?*

*Respondent:*

*I'd like to do a midwife course.*

*Interviewer:*

*And how much would that cost?*

*Respondent:*

*If I'm doing the one-year course at the college, at Stephenson, Access to Nursing, that's £5,000 ... It's just because of the visa that I've got on my passport, it's a dependant visa.*

Parenting commitments represented an additional barrier to further training and education. One interviewee in Oxgangs explained how she had been forced to abandon ambitions to become a nurse by the arrival of her first child:

*Interviewer:*

*So how did that work when you left school, what did you go into?*

*Respondent:*

*I went to college to do nannying at first and then I worked at the hospital doing caring. I wanted to go into nursing, and then I fell*

*with [my son] so I not so much jumped out of that but sort of like walked out, had to get out of it because of Josh being here and playgroup and the rest of it.*

Another female interviewee who worked as a nursery nurse in Grimsby expressed a desire to gain higher-level qualifications (NVQ 4) to increase her promotion prospects, but felt hamstrung by the inflexible scheduling of the college course:

*Interviewer:*

*Do you want to go into management?*

*Respondent:*

*Yeah I'd love to, I mean I'm training in work at the minute for a promotion, but obviously it's very difficult because the girls that are coming in now, the young girls that are coming in are all taking degrees because they can, I can't. I wanted to take another course a while ago and they'd only do it at night school, they wouldn't do it in the day so I couldn't do it because I don't have childcare ... I wanted my level 4 but I'd have had to go on a Tuesday night from six till nine, well I don't have anybody who can have the kids from six till nine on a Tuesday night and they won't do it in the day you see.*

The barriers to returning to education could be social as well as financial, particularly for those returning as mature students. One woman in Oxfords attributed her failure to complete her studies to the lack of peers at college as well as financial limitations:

*Respondent:*

*No I've been out of work for three or four years now. Just recently I tried to go back to college but because of me being on Income Support and like I didn't have financial family help around me like my mum, she doesn't have a job or anything so I found it really hard. It was mostly younger people at college as well and it's quite intimidating having 20 youngsters and I'm like five years older than them, I felt like I'd nae fit in so I could nae stick it. I'm*

*waiting to hear back from another course that I could do and it would probably be more people my own age and that.*

Evidently, there are significant barriers to returning to training or education, such as a lack of funds, family commitments or social discomfort. Encouraging social mobility through education and training is undoubtedly a laudable aim, but this research indicates that this is often far from straightforward for those targeted for such support.

Despite these difficulties, a minority of individuals did benefit from training or education. In the case of one woman in Grimsby, completing a nursery nurse course not only helped secure employment but also had a beneficial impact on her self-esteem, if not her earning potential:

*Respondent:*

*Yeah financially I wouldn't say we were any better off but me personally, because I've been to college for three years and passed my exams and I've got a job and I feel better in myself yeah definitely and more ... that I've done something ... Yeah cos you kind of have your kids and do bit jobs cos that's all you can do and you get a husband who's got a good job and yeah it's lovely, it's a nice life, but there's nothing for you, and I did the college course for me, not for anybody else, just for me.*

In Amlwch, an innovative programme for bringing skills and employment services into the town was also identified by one young lone parent as boosting her motivation and confidence to return to work:

*Respondent:*

*It's once a week but it breaks your week up and it's brilliant ... I used to sit in the house every day doing the same old thing but this has changed it and it's much better ... It's helping to get confidence to go back to work and stuff like that in the future, otherwise I think I'd probably be sat in the house losing confidence each day, because you're sat doing the same old thing ... They bring in [an employment*

brokerage], they bring in the careers and bring in whatever you want to talk about and what you want to go forward with they'll help you with everything. I think it's brilliant to have stuff like that [in] small towns like this.

*Interviewer:*

*So is it important that they come to you rather than you travel?*

*Respondent:*

*Yeah because I think because we live in Amlwch we're stuck here if you don't drive and stuff, you're stuck on an island unless you have public transport, so it's brilliant that they can provide stuff like that.*

The programme is now paying for the interviewee to have driving lessons to ensure that she is able to look for work outside of Amlwch in other areas where there is more employment. She is also receiving advice on possible options for realising her ambition to become a florist. What clearly stands out about the programme is its recognition of some of the local barriers to work, notably the geographical isolation of Amlwch, which makes it difficult for residents without private transport to access training, education or employment opportunities elsewhere. By bringing these services to the area, it represents a distinctive, locally tailored response, which is, in this particular case, reaping dividends by transforming the attitudes and motivation of a lone parent who might otherwise feel marginalised from the world of work.

## Conclusion

Overall, the research evidence indicates that the Government is justified in its concern for those low-skilled, low-paid workers who become trapped in jobs that offer few opportunities for progression. There are numerous examples of interviewees who appear unable to advance within their workplace, having become caught up in a low-pay, no-pay cycle or having experienced downward occupational mobility. Evidently, there are potential gains to be made by increasing the

opportunities for training and education among this group as a springboard into better work. Yet, our research also shows that many individuals interviewed recognise the potential for such gains but are unable to realise ambitions to study or retrain because of financial constraints and parenting commitments. Investment in skills and training is often not a straightforward passport to occupational mobility and success in the labour market. There is a real risk that current policies underestimate the constraints faced by those on limited means in returning to education. This reflects Dean's (2007, p. 585) observation that:

*... [the] assumption is that investment in a person's skills and training may produce a return that will benefit both the welfare of the individual and the productivity of the economy. This is, however, unduly individualistic in that the ability to invest in education and skills training and the effectiveness of the outcomes are subject to the wider social context, including the effects of poverty, class background, parental and peer group influences.*

Those people with the greatest barriers to work are precisely the same people who are likely to face the most significant barriers to accessing training or education. Clearly, this is not to suggest that policy-makers should not strive to increase opportunities. As the above example in Amlwch shows, innovative and locally tailored approaches to delivering training and employment advice can successfully raise motivation and aspirations. This surely represents one route for reducing potential barriers to skills development.

But difficulties in accessing training or education, as well as the more limited possibilities for capitalising on credentials in less buoyant labour markets, mean that the current policy focus on mobility has finite potential. It overlooks more immediate and realisable possibilities for improving the terms and conditions associated with the low-skilled, low-waged work that currently dominates the working lives of residents of deprived areas such as Blackburn, Amlwch and Grimsby. In such areas, it might make sense to focus just as much on improving the jobs that residents already have as seeking to equip them to compete for better

but potentially elusive opportunities in the labour market.

One final policy implication of these findings is that there is a notable tension between asserting the importance of providing opportunities for jobseekers to access higher-skilled work, while imposing forms of conditionality that require claimants to accept '*any suitable employment*' (DWP, 2008a, p. 39). In areas with slack labour markets dominated by '*poor work*', any suitable employment is likely to encompass employment in the lower occupational tiers. Such a '*work-first*' (Peck and Theodore, 2000) compulsion may well lock some jobseekers into precisely those '*low-skilled, low-paid jobs*' that the Green Paper on welfare reform (DWP, 2008c) seeks to provide opportunities to escape.



# 7 Policy implications

The intention of this final chapter is not to reproduce in detail the conclusions of preceding chapters but to identify the implications of this research for broad policy agendas. Though the research was never conceived explicitly as a study of work and worklessness, the sheer wealth of material it generated provides ample scope to reflect on current policy agendas. In particular, the perceptions and experiences of the 180 interviewees offer a valuable opportunity to consider critically the assumptions underpinning government policy about the aspirations and motivations of residents in deprived areas towards work. The research showed that there are a number of areas where policy assumptions are not borne out by the experiences of residents:

- A lack of work seemed a barrier to employment in some case study neighbourhoods even before the current economic downturn; this questions the official supply-side emphasis on employability rather than jobs within policies to tackle worklessness.
- Work does not always pay, with low-wage employment forcing some residents to work long hours or combine two jobs, or, in the case of those out of work, provides few financial incentives to return to work; the Minimum Wage is not always seen as a living wage.
- Work can provide social and economic benefits to individuals, but it is equally the case that '*poor work*' combining elements of low pay, long hours, unsocial shifts and exploitative working conditions can prove detrimental to health and well-being.
- Cultural explanations of worklessness and assertions that some benefit claimants are '*playing the system*' do not recognise the

concerted, if often unsuccessful, efforts of those struggling to find work in less buoyant labour markets.

- Work is not always beneficial for family life if pay is insufficient to meet child costs or work is not flexible enough to fulfil parenting commitments.
- Policies focused on increasing access to formal childcare overlook moral or pragmatic preferences for using family as a source of care.
- Official concerns with promoting social and occupational mobility are important, but underestimate how poverty or parenting commitments can limit opportunities for training or education.

This apparent gap between official rhetoric and the lived experience of residents in deprived areas has a number of direct policy implications:

- The difficulties that residents encounter in finding work mean that policy-makers may need to think about extending the scale and duration of demand-led interventions such as the Future Jobs Fund.
- Policy-makers need to focus more on the quality of available jobs in terms of pay, conditions and longer-term potential for progression in work; this includes placing more responsibility on employers to deliver good jobs.
- More attention needs to be paid to the potential costs of childcare, including understanding why tax credits are not always seen as sufficient incentives and to encouraging employers to provide 'family-friendly' jobs with hours that fit around parenting commitments.

- There is also a need for a more open policy debate on the appropriate balance between parenting responsibilities and work.
- Social mobility is an important policy objective, but more immediate benefits may be realised by improving the terms and conditions associated with the low-skilled, low-paid employment that features in the working lives of many of those living in the least buoyant labour markets.

In view of the centrality of work in the welfare reform, poverty, regeneration and social mobility agendas, it is worth reflecting more broadly on the implications of the research for these policy spheres. It should be noted that this study never set out explicitly to research these policy agendas. What follows is, therefore, a set of reflections on how these findings might usefully inform these policy arenas, rather than a set of direct recommendations based on empirical examination of specific policy issues.

- **Welfare reform:** the Government is right to focus on maximising the number of individuals in work, given the evidence that it does provide non-monetary benefits including a sense of independence and purpose, valued social interaction and enhanced self-esteem. But these benefits are often realised in spite of rather than because of the conditions attached to work. The apparent abundance of ‘poor work’ suggests that job quality and corporate responsibility are ‘the elephants in the room’ that remain unacknowledged in the current suite of welfare reforms. Without placing more onus on some employers to accept greater responsibility for improving pay and associated terms and conditions, many of those out of work might lack the incentives to take up ‘poor work’. These responsibilities include ensuring flexible working patterns for those seeking to balance work and family commitments. At present, work often infringes on the quality of family life. Yet, the Government does not seem to recognise the tension in its dual aim of supporting families and obliging parents to work.
- **Poverty:** the findings corroborate quantitative research showing that work is not always a guaranteed pathway out of poverty (Cooke and Lawton, 2008). The low-wage employment that is endemic in some of the less buoyant labour markets in our research leaves many of those in work struggling financially, as well as constraining opportunities for accessing childcare, training and education for those contemplating a return to employment. These difficulties could militate against the Government meeting both employment and child poverty targets if low pay acts as a disincentive to return to work. Individual reservations may be, in part, a consequence of a lack of understanding of potential gains through the tax credit system once in work, but it is equally the case that the Minimum Wage is often not seen as a living wage.
- **Regeneration:** raising levels of employment and promoting economic development have been identified as the primary mechanisms for reversing the fortunes of deprived areas through the Transforming Places agenda (CLG, 2008). It would be hard to dispute the logic of this strategy. But this research shows that any new area-based employment programmes need to be attentive to the dynamics of local labour markets. A lack of work, or the perceived poor quality of available work, are factors that will limit the employment prospects of residents. The recession has only made this worse. For this reason, the recent shift towards demand stimulation through the Future Jobs Fund is a welcome step, but this remains a short-term measure targeted at a single group. Our research shows that it is not just young people who struggle to find work, which suggests that the Future Jobs Fund could be expanded to target a broader range of workless groups. More fundamentally, the time may be ripe for a far more expansive policy debate about possible long-term demand-side strategies for embedding economic development and employment creation within future employment and regeneration programmes. A continuing emphasis on supply-side measures focused on improving employability is unlikely to revitalise deprived areas alone.

- **Social mobility:** improving opportunities for progression in work through skills development is a laudable policy goal. There is ample evidence that many individuals are trapped in low-wage work or low-pay/no-pay cycles, or have experienced downward occupational mobility. Yet, more marginal groups in the labour market can face considerable barriers in accessing training and education. Policy-makers may also need to consider the geography of employment opportunity. Those living in the least buoyant labour markets have few options other than low-wage, low-skilled work; and upskilling may not necessarily provide a guaranteed route into better employment. This suggests the need for a hitherto neglected debate on improving terms and conditions in the lower end of the labour market, rather than relying solely on government programmes to provide a ladder up to better opportunities. This includes looking at how employers can play a more active role in providing stimulating, meaningful work that both enables individuals to escape poverty and provides opportunities to progress.



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