

What's our story?

Mothers in Lambeth share their
experiences and perceptions of
Jobcentre Plus



Skills Network
2014

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About Skills Network

Skills Network is a women's collective based in Lambeth. We offer free, accredited training to enable mothers to support their children's learning and develop their own skills; training and experience of cooperative working and peer support; work experience through our parent to parent 'skillsharing' in Lambeth and social action projects addressing issues women in Lambeth face.

We are a registered charity but we operate as a cooperative; everyone who joins the organisation, whether as training course participant, facilitator, support worker or anything else, becomes involved in decision-making, and in making our projects happen.

Our Vision

Our vision is of a society in which different types of knowledge and different ways of learning, seeing and being are equally valued. We are allowed to be different and see the world differently. No one feels they are below others, or needs to put others below them to feel OK.

In this world we complement, reflect off and counterbalance each other. Together, our shared experiences and strengths make for something much greater than any one of us alone could create.

In this society we recognise and embrace our common vulnerability as human beings, knowing that throughout our lives, we depend on each other to meet our needs. We work collectively to solve the constraints which life throws at us. We are allowed to fail.

And we all challenge ourselves constantly to create this society – it exists because we consciously and continuously make it .

Many of the women who are part of Skills Network have direct experience of difficult circumstances including: unemployment; managing as a single parent on very low income; struggling to support a child with learning difficulties; experiencing bullying, domestic or other forms of abuse; experiencing feelings of isolation, depression or anxiety; living in unstable and arbitrary temporary housing situations. The knowledge and understanding gained from these experiences are integral to the work we do.

Skills Network's Social Action - We Count!

Our Social Action programme aims to ensure that women who experience poverty in Lambeth are heard and counted in the design of systems and services that affect them and their children.

We want to develop and practise a model of work that is truly peer-led; provides thorough, transferable training; and builds platforms of constructive exchange between policy-makers, those who implement policy, and those on the sharp end of austerity.

What's our story?

What's Our Story is our pilot Social Action project and grew out of discussions between members of Skills Network about their experiences of Jobcentre Plus services. We wanted to gather views and experiences from other mothers and understand the situation better.

Eight women have been involved with the core research working group. Most of us have direct experience of using the Jobcentre in one way or another. Three of us have experience of designing and carrying out research and shared our knowledge of the advantages and challenges of participatory research methods with the rest of the group. Together the group designed a questionnaire and selected images that we felt would help people articulate their experiences.

In-depth interviews were carried out with fifteen women, recorded and transcribed verbatim. We also held seven citizens' jury-style sessions with researchers and decision-makers from a variety of organisations. Some twenty women, all of whom have experienced state support whilst unemployed, participated in these sessions. They listened to presentations, responded to what they heard in small group discussions that were recorded, and interrogated our expert witnesses.

This report presents the stories of some mothers in Lambeth about their experience of engaging with Jobcentre Plus. There are some positive stories. There are also stories of fear, shame and confusion: stories of frustration at a system that is not working for them and

in some cases feels as if it is obstructing their efforts to take control of their own and their children's futures.

We have also tried to examine and comment on other stories we hear about this issue – from government, and from the media. We wanted to think about how these stories relate to and interact with the stories we heard from women we interviewed. And how this frames the way in which services like Jobcentre Plus work.

This is just the start. We want to engage more deeply with these and other stories, which are seen through different filters from our own, told from different perspectives: those of Jobcentre Plus workers, of policy-makers, of other people in the statutory and voluntary sector, of anyone who is interested in this issue. We want to work together to create a shared story, one which moves away from the sometimes conflicting and divisive narratives which seem to exist on all sides. From this will hopefully come more creative and innovative approaches that are more likely to work for everyone.

To this end, we have provided a way to interact with our research at the end of this document and would really like to hear your views, ideas and experiences. The next phase of this project will be all about searching for new ways forward; collaborating to create and enact different, more mutually beneficial stories.

Who did we interview?

The women we interviewed are all aged between 18 and 40 years, live in Lambeth and come from a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. They are all primary carers for children under the age of 18. All but one have used Jobcentre Plus in either Brixton, Clapham Common or Stockwell. Ten of the interviewees have children under the age of five years, and receive income support. Only three of the

women have had direct experience of the Work Programme, so the stories we present here are focused on Jobcentre Plus.

The majority of the women we interviewed have some connection with Skills Network and have attended at least one of our workshops, outreach days or training courses.

Our participatory Process

This project piloted a process which we plan to refine and use as a model for further Social Action work. **We want to develop a model which reflects our organisational vision and values; one which combines different knowledge and experience, and builds constructive, equal exchange between decision makers, those who implement policy decisions and those who are directly affected by policies.**

The model has three stages:

- Participatory research: identifying and choosing issues to explore; training in research methods; designing and carrying out qualitative research.
- Social Action Conferences: engaging policy makers, policy implementers and researchers in constructive exchanges using an adapted citizens' jury model.
- Dissemination and campaigning: using interactive dissemination materials and events to engage with others interested in the issue; identifying and linking up with work around the issue that is happening elsewhere; raising awareness of findings through social media.

This report is the first part of our interactive dissemination. On the back cover is a template on which we would love you to write your own thoughts and ideas – take a photo and send it back to us!

We still have a long way to go before we get this process right. This section outlines are some of the lessons we have learnt.

“ Taking part in peer research has been a huge learning curve. My main reason for taking part was giving myself and others in a similar circumstances a voice, unemployed mothers in Lambeth, giving those of us least likely to be heard a platform to influence at some level.

I wanted to be a part of an authentic voice of women who are marginalised and often excluded from decisions which affect us directly. We are research subjects; it's not often that we are also the researchers.”

(Research group member)

Introducing Participatory Research

Research group members spent five Saturdays learning about different types of research and data and looking at examples of participatory research. They explored ideas about pre-understanding and research bias, building on concepts about stories and perspectives explored during our cooperative working and peer support training.

It is extremely important not to skimp on this part of the process. **Getting used to reflecting on our own positions, and how that affects what we hear others say and how we guide conversations, is crucial for the interview and the analysis process.** It needs to be continually revisited. Everyone in our group had already completed our training in cooperative working, which focuses on being aware of the impacts of power and differing perspectives and so already had a thorough grounding in these ideas. Even so, in our next project we plan to spend longer on this phase.

Choosing the issue and training in data collection

Project participants then worked with the facilitator to choose questions they wanted to research and received training in interview methods. We worked together to develop a questionnaire and select images to be used during the interviews that we felt would stimulate discussion. Informal discussions with two women from Skills Network who were using Jobcentre Plus informed and shaped our questionnaire.

What have we learnt?

Interviewers who had strong views and emotive experiences related to the subjects being discussed found it especially difficult to remain in the position of interviewer and not start engaging in a more in-depth discussion. **Trying to remain 'neutral' during interview conversations can feel forced and unnatural.** Interviewers decided that before they began, they would prepare themselves and the interviewee by explaining that they would purposefully be 'holding back' and that this may feel strange.

It is important to spend enough time practising and explaining the research topic, role playing and practising interviewing, and getting to know the questionnaire. Getting people to read back transcripts of practice interviews they have carried out is a very useful exercise. One interviewer commented that she was 'shocked at how little I recognised, how little I'd heard.'

Data collection took longer than anticipated – considerable strategy and resources need to be put into recruiting people to interview. One challenge has been recruiting interview respondents from outside of Skills Network. Many women we approached felt suspicious of research and, not knowing us, were reluctant to share their story. Word of mouth and personal contacts did not lead to as many outside respondents as we hoped. We also tried leafleting outside the Jobcentre, but this was difficult, as it is not possible to approach people inside, and outside people are keen to get away (perhaps fearing stigma).

The majority of our interviewees were women we had already built relationships with through our workshops, outreach days and training courses.

Using the Citizens' Jury Model to Explore Policy

Finding out what is happening in policy is an important part of this process: but reading policy reports is not always the best way for people to get their heads around it. Instead we ran a Social Action Conference in our offices in which we used the citizens' jury model to explore current policy: 'expert witnesses' provided information about the issues we were investigating and responded to questions from a 'jury' consisting of women who had experience using the services we were researching. The process was tightly facilitated: after a short presentation from the witness, the jury broke into groups, discussed what they had heard, including (importantly) their emotional response to it, and formulated questions together. We then all came back together and each group asked their questions in turn. The jury members were not allowed to ask follow up questions or interrupt the process. This was to ensure that everyone got an equal chance to speak and that discussions did not become diverted into particular issues that affected one or a few people.

Twenty-five local women – both from within and outside of Skills Network – have been involved in the Social Action Conference events. We tried to include a range of perspectives and knowledge on our panels.

What have we learnt?

The citizens' jury sessions were extremely useful. Both 'jury' and 'witnesses' reported that they had learnt a lot. **Perhaps the biggest challenge is ensuring that sessions are skillfully facilitated and that we stick to process, without making people feel shut down or silenced.** The matters discussed in these sessions

were at times very emotive for people and touched on difficult experiences. Getting the balance right between retaining the integrity and tightness of the process, and loosening it when people become particularly distressed or are expanding on a particularly pertinent issue is tough. We feel it is important to have a facilitator experienced at facilitating citizens' juries and it is helpful if they are external. External facilitators are often better able to shift established dynamics and habits of groups (such as who takes the lead talking), and have enough distance to be strict about adhering to the process.

It is necessary to spend a lot of time preparing people for the citizens' jury process and making them aware of the frustration they might feel from being asked to go through a tightly structured discussion about an issue that has emotional weight for them. It is helpful to refresh this before every session and after every break.

In many people's experience, when policy-makers and 'professionals' come to speak to them it is usually to respond to questions that are directly affecting them. Sometimes, because topics were directly relevant to the jurors' lives, conversations became drawn towards people's personal situations. For a citizens' jury to be successful, it is important to keep bringing everyone back to the research questions.

We had not anticipated how emotive the citizens' jury sessions would be, nor how difficult the process would feel for some people. However, once people became used to the process, they appreciated the value:

“ At first I found the process difficult, really difficult but in the end I think we achieved more because we didn't get bogged down in one to one arguments or pinned down on one topic... it allowed many topics to be covered, many questions to be answered, and everyone to contribute. But it's a very difficult process – and you have to stop yourself from reacting too much – and you can't dominate things, or personalize it. ”
(Research team member)

Group analysis and write up

Peer research often means that the data is collected by peer researchers and the analysis and write-up is done by one 'professional' researcher. We felt that to present as fair and rich an analysis as we could, we needed everyone's perspectives on the interview and citizens' jury transcripts. We met together and worked in pairs on transcripts, one by one. Each person read through the transcript in front of them and thought about how the woman being interviewed felt about their experiences, what they had found difficult and what they had found helpful. They discussed their ideas with their partners, writing down key points to share

with the group. We drew out themes from what we had collectively found, and worked in pairs on picking out quotes and writing up thoughts on the different sections.

What we have learnt?

This is one of the most challenging parts of the process. Some research group members felt concerned that they did not have the 'academic writing skills' required to produce a report.

On reflection, more thought was needed to clearly break down the steps and aspects of writing up research. What some research group members were worried about was the actual putting pen to paper. But many of the stages of 'writing up' and presenting findings are not actually about writing. They include reading material and deciding/ highlighting what is relevant; discussing and sharing ideas; reviewing sections and working on a design that brings out key points and ideas as clearly as possible.

Different research group members had confidence in different areas. A more structured approach to 'writing up', which took everyone through each of these stages in a step by step way, might have led group members to feel more secure when it came to putting pen to paper. It would also have made everyone feel they had contributed effectively to the writing up and presentation of findings.

It is important to leave sufficient time for all these stages to be done collaboratively. Otherwise there is a risk of those with most confidence in their academic skills having undue influence over the final presentation of findings.

Limitations of our approach

This is very small-scale, qualitative research which cannot provide definitive findings or polished recommendations. Rather, we want to highlight experiences of policy implementation, provoke discussion and offer different perspectives on ways to support low-income mothers in particular, and anyone dealing with difficult circumstances in general.

We acknowledge that we have focused on one perspective and set of stories: that of the women who are experiencing the Jobcentre as benefit recipients. These are the stories that most reflect the experiences of the research group. We would like, in follow up work, to explore other perspectives, notably that of Jobcentre workers.

The words and phrases that build stories

What kinds of words are used in Jobcentre operations- and what are their effects?

“When I was walking out of the Brixton centre and I saw a sign up saying ‘we help mothers back into work’, I thought, oh, this looks good, let me just go in and see what they can do.”

Research participants referred repeatedly to the idea of ‘help’ and how this is what they are told the Jobcentre is there to do. However they explained that their experience is quite different: rather than ‘helped’ they feel checked up on, monitored, policed. This is reflected in the punitive official language, which almost gives the impression that being unemployed in itself is a crime. Terms such as ‘sanctions’, ‘mandatory work’ and accompanying ‘signing in books’ and ‘cards’ add to this effect. This language contributes to a sense of fear and deliberate repression, and the feeling that you are constantly being interrogated, interviewees said they felt like “they wanna keep you quiet”, “they can watch you.”

The language of ‘help’ and ‘support’ is also sometimes experienced as patronising and degrading. People feel the system assumes they are incompetent and irresponsible and the language of helping and supporting is often used in disempowering ways.

During citizens’ juries, some expert witnesses referred to ‘people at the bottom of society’ - jury members would have preferred ‘those on lowest incomes’. Kat Wall of the New Economics Foundation spoke explicitly about the need to try and change the language of the debate:

‘use different language, start chipping away at this idea that its Ok to call people names ... to start changing the debate ... you have to use language that you want to talk in and you want to be talked about with.’

She suggested we need to change the language of **benefits** and **claimants** to citizen’s income, **entitlements** and **rights**: using the word **social security** rather than **welfare**. Changing the

language of ‘helping’ and ‘supporting’ to be more **mutual** – to reflect models in which everyone feels able to give and take what they can and need, removing the stigma of needing help. This kind of language implies a shift away from a culture of individualism to a more collective one.

The research identified key words that are widely used in current policy that we wish to challenge the implied definitions of:

‘Worklessness’ and **‘generations of worklessness’**: we felt the term ‘workless’ ignored and undermined the unpaid care and administrative work all the women we spoke to do each day. It gives the impression that they are just sitting around doing nothing. There is also continued debate about the idea that there are generations of workless, **work-shy** families. Research has found that this so-called intergenerational worklessness is a myth and represents a tiny minority.¹ But they are talked about so frequently, it creates the impression there are many families all over Britain with generations of people who have never experienced paid work.

Welfare ‘dependency’: this phrase seems to turn reliance on social security into a addiction similar to alcohol or drug dependency. It erases the role of any structural or economic factors causing people to need financial support. We are concerned that linking ‘welfare’ with ‘dependency’ turns the idea of state financial support into a problem that needs to be eradicated. So when solutions to tackle poverty and inequality are being designed, there is, by implication, no room for the notion of entitlement to state support.

Responsibility: seems to be used in the context of current welfare policy to mean whether or not you comply to the conditions of jobseeking requirements. We have found that women we talk to **are** taking responsibility for their and their children’s lives, as well as the lives of others in their communities: although it might not look like that to someone who doesn’t know the details and challenges of their circumstances.

What does work mean to you?

“ Basically, it makes you feel like you've got worth. I would class as work anything that you are doing, where you know that you are making a change – could be to the society, an organisation – either voluntary work or paid work. ”

“ That's a difficult one. Because work, it means paid, having income. But also I have worked without getting money as a reward – voluntary work, work helping family painting and decorating. That's work.. ”

“ Independence I suppose, having proper independence, getting your own money. To some extent a sense of worth, does that make sense? you meet new people, doing something that's worthwhile. Makes a difference, whether it be small or not. ”

Time-banking offers an alternative model for organizing exchange and understanding work.

This model recognizes that we all have different skills and support to offer and we all also have different needs. Time is the principal currency. Everyone's time is seen as equal, so one hour of my time is equal to one hour of your time, irrespective of whatever we choose to exchange. For every hour participants 'deposit' in a timebank, perhaps by giving practical help and support to others, they are able to 'withdraw' equivalent support in time when they themselves are in need. The participant decides what they can offer. ²

A researcher from the New Economics Foundation (NEF) who attended a citizens' jury session described the model:

“[It is] set up by a local community and its run at a local level... it's open to everybody. It accepts the fact that we all have different skills, we all have different things that we can contribute and we all have different things that we need. [You might be] in a job and you are earning quite a lot of money and you don't want social security. But actually you might really need to talk to someone, because you have a caring responsibility for a relative and you are not quite sure what to do or how to get help with that. Whereas someone else might have a completely different life experience to you, but they could share something really valuable.... often people who use time banks find that people are much more willing to give than they are to take. So it's trying to create a culture where it's normal to give and receive. And saying that actually it's OK to get support as well as to give it.”

“ Good question. Work means to me something inflexible, something difficult. ”

“ Independence really. Then I wouldn't have to rely on other people, if I'm getting paid or not - I know that I've worked for these hours, this is what I'm gonna get paid. Not oh shit, if I haven't done that, than I'm not gonna get paid.

“ Work.

Like going out, working. It means everything to me, because I know I have to work to look after my children... I have unpaid work experience, and it is quite good, because it makes me want to go more, to do something with my life. ”

Most of the women we spoke to were motivated to find work, and many associated it with a sense of independence and self-worth. They saw work as doing something useful, making a change. On the whole they felt that when people talk about work they mean formal paid work – but a number felt it important to assert that the labour they put into caring for children and helping family members was work and something that had value. There is tension between feeling a sense of shame or failure at not being in paid work and recognizing that the unpaid work they are doing should be acknowledged.

”

There was also apprehension that paid jobs may restrict their ability to protect and nurture their children.

“ In terms of what the Department of Work and Pensions define as work – it's paid work... probably now more than 24 hours, because that is the new threshold for family working tax credits. ”

(CJ expert witness (CESI))

Another perspective on work - the Core Economy

Paid work in the formal economy relies on the unpaid work of parents, grandparents and carers who do household work, bring up children, look after neighbours, and support people who are sick to get well and stay well. This labour (whether part-time or full-time) is crucial but as it is unpaid it is undervalued and underappreciated. Care is seen as far less important than paid employment in the formal economy, despite being worth an estimated £119 billion to the UK economy each year. That is more than the annual budget for the NHS. The academic Neeva Goodwin writes that care work is the labour of the 'core economy' which is central to the functioning of societies and economies. Recognising that caring is essential work helps us think differently about what 'making a contribution to society' means and about how to better support people to balance paid and unpaid work. ³

“ Work mean to me? It's good – you need to get out there to earn yourself a living, you can't just rely on benefits, it's not enough, and it doesn't help, you have to go out work and study, and get the job you want, work your way up to it, work is important. ”

Policy context

Some of us have formal research experience. Some of us have personal experience of Lambeth Jobcentres and are parents. In this sense we are 'peers' to interviewees. Bringing together these different types of expertise and working together on a level of equal power and status has enabled us, we feel, to come up with a unique analysis filtered through the lenses of both people outside and inside of the situations we are researching.

We have tried to make sense of the policy context of jobcentre reform through our citizens' jury sessions with researchers from Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, (CESI) the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), The National Policy Institute (NPI), New Economics Foundation (NEF) and Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE), and with staff from Lambeth Council and local JobCentre Plus offices. We have also read key reports and looked out for information in the news. The picture is not yet completely clear while the government is testing out Universal Credit and implementing reforms.

Universal Credit is the main new policy

It will combine most of the benefits that our research respondents receive including jobseeker's allowance (JSA), income support, child tax credits, working tax credits and housing benefits, into one, monthly payment.

The aim of Universal Credit, according to the government is to "make work pay" – to make sure that it is always worth going to work instead of receiving benefits. So the total amount any family can claim in benefits will be capped, initially at £500 per week for couples and households with children and £350 per week for single people.

There are no limits on how many hours a week you can work if you're claiming Universal Credit. Instead, the amount you get will gradually reduce as you earn more. This is intended to stop people from getting 'trapped' at certain thresholds of hours of work, after which they start losing benefits.

Existing claimants will move on to Universal Credit as part of a phased approach between 2014 and 2017. There are delays with the roll out of Universal Credit, and the government is still revising the plan. It is unclear when it will be introduced into Lambeth.

Introduction of the Work Programme

In 2011 the Work Programme was introduced, replacing the Flexible New Deal (FND) for lone parents.⁴

The New Deal programme for lone parents was found to be popular and effective – those who participated in it were more likely to move into work than parents who did not, and they particularly appreciated the tailored support received from specialist advisors.⁵

In the official DWP publication about Jobcentre Plus service standards it states that 'we are here to provide work for those who can, and support for those that cannot.' The guidelines note that 'many of our services are delivered over the phone' and they also 'encouraging people to find information, make claims and look for jobs online.'

Jobcentres are designed to 'mostly be used for booked appointments: 'so we can spend more of our time helping people who need extra support.'

Under the title *Our responsibilities to you* it states that they want customers to be 'happy' with the service and feel well treated. They promise to be friendly, fair and helpful, professional and to 'treat you with respect.' In return the section entitled *What we expect from you* asks for people to give information, be on time, tell them if something has changed and behave reasonably:

'You can help to make the Jobcentre Plus service pleasant by:

- treating our staff with respect, and
- being considerate and polite.'

The guidance emphasises that they will respect privacy and 'arrange a private interview room if you need privacy'.

It also encourages service users to give feedback and gives a lengthy explanation of complaints procedures. They suggest making complaints at the office or by phone, and offer a callback service. You can also make formal complaints through District Managers and the Chief Operating Office.

http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/@benefits/documents/digitalasset/dg_202270.pdf

Sanctions have increased in frequency and severity

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) figures showed that between November 2011 and June 2012, 499,000 sanctions were imposed. This increased to 553,000 the following year. According to DWP the most common reason for a JSA sanction (36 per cent) was failure to actively look for work. 20 per cent were sanctioned because they did not have a good reason for not turning up to meetings.⁶

Sanctions will be tougher under the new regime – it is possible people could risk losing their entire Universal Credit payment if they do not adhere to their 'Claimant Commitment', but this has not been decided yet.

Sanctions are being increased despite an International Evidence Review that showed that while the threat of sanctions can increase effectiveness of interventions, actually being sanctioned does not increase a person's likelihood of entering sustainable work. In fact some studies suggest it has the opposite effect. The same review also found that certain subgroups in each country were more likely to be sanctioned, and, on average, people who 'are sanctioned face more barriers to employment than other claimants.'⁷

A recent report by Policy Exchange noted that 29 per cent of JSA recipients who receive their first lower tier sanction have it overturned on appeal – that is, 5,600 people a month are wrongly sanctioned, and face unnecessary hardship.⁸

The Claimant Commitment

Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimants must now sign a 'Claimant Commitment'. This is a contract that will set out what the claimant will be expected to do as a condition for receiving their benefits. This will include work-focused requirements, such as job searches. Claimant Commitments have now been introduced into Jobcentres in Lambeth.

Part time work is not enough

Universal Credit will require people to demonstrate that they are taking steps to increase their working hours or pay up to a certain threshold. For the first time such conditions will apply to people who are already in work but receiving top ups on their income.⁹

Staff Cuts in the Jobcentre

Jobcentre staff have been subject to public sector cuts. In 2010 there were 9,300 job losses in Jobcentre Plus. In 2011 a further almost 20 per cent of Jobcentre Plus posts were cut.¹⁰

Measuring Success

Jobcentre Plus outcomes are measured by the number of people who come off benefits, rather than the number of people who move into work. This means that sanctioning someone, and cutting off their benefits can count as a successful outcome. Although targets are not officially set, leaked internal memos from regional Jobcentre managers, and accounts from staff anonymously interviewed strongly suggest that unofficially, pressure is put on staff to apply sanctions. In January this year the Work and Pensions Select Committee of MPs said Jobcentre staff should no longer be given incentives according to how many benefit claimants they get off the dole, but rewarded for how many they get back into employment.¹¹

During Citizens' Jury sessions it was noted by a researcher from Centre for Social and Economic Inclusion (CESI) that success is now entirely measured by outcomes. Previously, processes such as interviews and interactions were also monitored and evaluated.

Other changes to the Jobcentre include:

- Switching the way claims are processed to call centres and online.
- Increasing penalties for fraud
- Requiring mothers to go on to JSA when their child turns five (it was previously twelve, and under New Labour was changed to seven years), and contacting them to start preparing for work from when they are even younger.
- Expecting people to accept work that is up to a 90 minute commute (previously it was 60 minutes).

Changes to Income support

At the end of April 2014, the government introduced new rules that affect single parents who receive income support. Parents who claim income support and have a child aged three or four, have to attend work-focused interviews at Jobcentre Plus. Advisers can ask parents to take part in 'work related activity', for example attending courses or updating their CV.

However, single parents **will not be expected to look for work or be in work before your youngest child is five.**

Single parents with children over the age of one may also be asked to attend work-focused interviews at the Jobcentre more frequently.¹²

(Information from www.gingerbread.org.uk)

Jobcentre workers experience pressure to apply sanctions

In 2011 a whistleblower said staff at his Jobcentre were given targets of three people a week to refer for sanctions, where benefits are removed for up to six months. The DWP at first denied the claims, and then admitted that 'their message to be clearer about conditionality had been misinterpreted by a small number of JobCentre Plus offices'. However job advisors, speaking anonymously to a journalist, said that targets and pressure to stop people's benefits still exist in their offices – even that people have been threatened with the sack for not meeting targets. They said that staff who are chasing targets under pressure, are more likely to target those who are the least able to understand and defend themselves. They noted that a good advisor should be able to motivate people and therefore be giving fewer sanctions, and felt frustration at being prevented from providing support.¹³

Changes to childcare support

According to a briefing published in 2011 by Gingerbread, the Universal Credit system will:

*'extend help with childcare costs to parents working below 16 hours a week on the same terms as presently offered to those working more than 16 hours, i.e. coverage of 70 per cent of childcare costs of up to £175 for one child and £300 for two or more children. However, this ... [is] ... following the reduction in eligible childcare costs from 80 to 70 per cent in April 2011.'*¹⁴

The reduction of childcare costs supported by the government in 2011 has meant that eligible families had to find 30 per cent rather than 20 per cent of childcare bills. With childcare costs rising fast, this has been a severe blow for many families, particularly parents working more than 16 hours a week and requiring childcare.

We understand that under Universal Credit it is now proposed that coverage of childcare costs will return to 80 or 85 per cent.

A report by the Children's Society warns, however, that reforms risk substantially reducing the amount of support received by the lowest income working families:

*'This is not a simple cut in support, nor can the support simply be replaced. It is the result of restructuring of support, and specifically, the incorporation of Housing Benefit into Universal Credit ... Currently tax credits cover up to 70 per cent of childcare costs for children in working families. However, many low-income working families can get up to 96 per cent of their childcare costs covered through the benefits and tax credits system. The additional 26 per cent is provided through Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.'*¹⁵

DWP guidelines suggest that Jobcentre Plus is expected to provide some kind of support for childcare. However the experience of staff and women we spoke to was that people were told to find their own provision.

What's our story? My time is not my own.

All the women we interviewed were mothers. Many have sole responsibility for caring for their children. Many felt the conditions for receiving benefits and the expectation that you can move quickly into full time work put unrealistic pressures on mothers.

The women we spoke to felt they were expected to follow the Jobcentre schedule no matter what, sometimes having to attend appointments outside of school hours, and in one case while their child was seriously ill in hospital. Appointment times are not regular so it is very difficult to organise schedules and plan their week.

One woman's child has a serious ongoing health condition, which the Jobcentre are aware of:

“ *I have been told you have to sign on. No exception. He [my son] was critically ill in hospital for a week. But if I hadn't signed on ... they would have cut me off, even if I had a letter from the hospital.* **”**

During citizens' jury sessions it was suggested that women are expected to look for work 30 hours a week— pretty much every hour their children are in school.

They are also expected to locate and organise quality childcare provision in order to be 'work-ready' at short notice.

Respondents found that in their experience the Jobcentre had done little to help them overcome the barrier of lack of childcare. The free provision for two, three and four year olds is only three hours a day. Above that 70% of the charges can be subsidised, but the 30% left to pay is pricey. One respondent explained it was not always easy to get clear information from the Jobcentre about the childcare subsidy she could claim because recent policy changes had caused confusion

“ *I am a single mum. I don't have a support network. I've been told that the money I receive, it's not for my daughter, it's for me to look for work...the woman said that whilst I am receiving that money, looking for work is my full-time job.* **”**

Many women felt they were being pushed into full time work and worried about how they could manage with their parental commitments. Most women we spoke to want to work but also want to provide emotional security and good quality care for their children.

Most are keen to find part-time work with hours that are compatible with childcare responsibilities, but feel the message is that only full-time work is acceptable.

“ Sometimes, I feel like I am being pushed into something that I don't want to do. They give me time to explain, but they are saying they do not want anyone to go into part-time work. ”

Many women felt they were being pushed into full time work and worried about how they could manage with their parental commitments.

“ My advisor she tried to force me to work full-time, but I have 3 children, and I can't work full-time and look after my kids, it is too much for me. I would love to work, but part time. ”

The women in our study were not simply making a financial decision as to whether they would take paid employment – they also sought assurance that their employer would respect their parental responsibilities. They have genuine fears and anxieties about how entering full time work would affect their ability to care properly for their children and about the quality of childcare if they need to put them in nursery. The short interview times and stringent requirements of the current system do not allow room for addressing or working through these fears.

Women we spoke to had found that most of the jobs available at the Jobcentre are low-paid and likely to have inflexible conditions. One woman had started attending the Jobcentre before she was obliged to because she was keen to improve her qualification level. She wanted to take an apprenticeship but was only offered retail jobs which seemed unrealistic: *“River Island is not really flexible if you're a mother, and the pay wasn't really good: I would have to put in overtime and do all these things so I can fund childcare and cover the cost of rent and bills for at least a year or two, before my daughter starts proper school.”*

Most of the mothers avoided taking their children to the Jobcentre. But sometimes they have no choice. They noted that conditions are not at all child-friendly. The place feels dismal, there is nothing for the children to do and they are not allowed to have a snack.

“ We have to start with part time and then move on. You understand. We have our children to look after ... it's not something we can jump in [to] and start full time. ”

“ I've taken my children with me [to the Jobcentre] on a couple of occasions when it's half term. There's nothing... my kids might get up and play with the leaflets on the stand, and they get told off. Because, you know, they get bored. They have to be quiet. They have to sit down. They can't do anything. But like I said, if I don't turn up I get into trouble... even though they know it's half term. ”

Repeatedly, women described the feeling that when it comes to the Jobcentre their time is not their own. The expectation seems to be that they cannot manage time or will misuse it. They perceive the message to be, while the Jobcentre time is important – you can be sanctioned if you are just two minutes late – yours is not. Women said they are expected to wait for appointments. Our interviews suggest that most of the mothers we spoke to seem to put considerable energy into trying to manage their time.

“ ...one day, my child was finishing nursery at 11:30, so I told her I have to see her by 10:30. Then it got to 11:30 and I was still sitting there waiting – I said to her, the nursery where my child goes, will charge me if I am late - but she doesn't care, does not care about this. ”

Where mothers were able to choose appointment times that fit into their wider schedules, they very much appreciated being given more control.

“ They are quite helpful when it comes to me coming, because they understand that I have a child in reception, so they ask me if I can come at whatever time and if not they will ask me to choose a suitable time. ”

Where mothers were able to choose appointment times that fit into their wider schedules, they very much appreciated being given more control.

“ Usually I ask for them to give me appointments first thing in the morning – that way I can literally drop my daughter at school and go straight to the Jobcentre so it doesn't mess up my day – but sometimes they just give me whenever, they pull up a calendar and whichever space is clear that will be the time I get. It's not a routine... I've made it now that I don't do anything on Thursdays, because I know that I might have to go to the Jobcentre..... When they sanctioned my money I couldn't even send my daughter to school because I didn't have money to top up my oyster. I had to leave my house at 7:30 so that I could walk to school so that I could get there on time....obviously as a mum I will do whatever I have to do to get my daughter on time. ”

NOT MY TIME

by Hazel Emmons

It is not my time,
to speak the words that echo my point of view
It is not my time,
to be made to wait in the endless jobless queue
It is not my time,
I am controlled by every word the Job Centre say
It is not my time,
to question at all I am just here to obey
It is not my time,
to have the choice I have not earned that right
It is not my time,
I am deemed unworthy, accept my struggle and strife
It is not my time,
all they see before them is a single workless Mum
It is not my time,
I lost my voice when I became a benefit bum

Doesn't matter how it all began
Doesn't matter what the circumstances are
Doesn't matter what situation you are in
Doesn't matter how you have struggled so far

It is not my time,
my financial position is dependent on the state
It is not my time,
I am undeserving too little definitely too late
It is not my time,
to make plans and have control on my life
It is not my time,
when I am trapped in this chaotic unending fight
It is not my time,
I dare not dream of what I would like to achieve
It is not my time,
only to be told what I can and cannot receive
It is not my time,
to even think I can say what is right for me
It is not my time,
it will only be my time when I am benefit free

What's our story? Cycles of shame and judgement

When we talk about shame we mean the emotion we experience when we feel our 'defects' are exposed to others.' It comes from what feels like negative judgement of us by others or society as a whole.

It is not about what we do, or a behaviour we could change. It is the feeling that there is something wrong with us intrinsically, in our actual selves.¹⁶

Brené Brown, author of the book Women and Shame, describes shame as 'the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging'. She is adamant: "you can not shame or belittle people into changing their behaviors."¹⁷

"Shame undermines confidence and saps the ability of people to help themselves. Policies that are stigmatising are likely to be equally counterproductive."¹⁸

Sometimes conflicts arise. Sometimes behavior and actions need to be reflected on and addressed. But shaming people is not a way to make this happen. As Oliver Burkeman notes 'making people feel bad about who they are is actually a really, really ineffective way to get them to change.'¹⁹ Rather, it can lead to an entrenchment of blaming and negative judgements, and cycles of shame and recrimination. This creates divisive stories in which both sides dehumanizes the other.

The women we talked to told us of situations which had made them feel ashamed and instances when they had witnessed others being shamed or humiliated. These instances were usually linked to being judged, 'told off' or interrogated in ways that undermined their sense of being a 'person' with dignity who

'making people feel bad about who they are is actually a really ineffective way to get them to change.' Rather, it can lead to an entrenchment of blaming and negative judgements, and cycles of shame and recrimination.

Respondents are aware of negative judgements of ‘mums on benefits’ in the media and the deliberate political language around the ‘something for nothing culture’.



fulfilled their responsibilities. They felt like people were questioning their honesty and competence including as a mother. Some incidents involved direct accusations of ‘using my tax money to pay for your child’. Others are more subtle.

“ I would usually be at home, giving her her snack. So I bought her chips, so she was eating chips when I had to go in, but the security man said she’s not allowed to eat her chips in here, you’ve got to go outside and throw the chips away. I understand that you do get people that don’t respect their space. ...Its not so much them asking her not to eat the chips, it’s how the person approached my 6-year-old and spoke to her. For me that was a problem – you don’t speak to the child, you speak to the adult. That could have been relayed in so many ways, it could have backfired on you, the security guard, or it could have backfired on me. It could have been put across like I was neglecting my daughter. That got me really angry - that he would go to my 6 year old and say oh you’re not allowed to eat in here, you got to put that away. ”

Respondents are aware of negative judgements of ‘mums on benefits’ in the media and the deliberate political language around, for example, the ‘something for nothing culture’ and ‘strivers v shirkers.’ They felt strongly that they have to assert that these judgements and stereotypes do not represent them. They don’t want to be, or appear to be “lazy people not looking for work”. They are concerned that if they do not agree to do as they are told, they might be categorized as ‘not willing.’

In some interviews there were judgements made by interviewees about other people; “drug addicts” “people who are not doing anything” . It was suggested that those are the people who the Jobcentre should be after, not me.

“ I see the gentleman and he said what am I doing, and if I want to work why did I have another child. And I said to him everybody makes mistake in life, and it is not like it will happen again. Everybody do make mistake – and he was asking after the father, and that its not fair for them to be paying me tax credit, and what the father is doing, and is he helping me. And I said to him, the father is not really there for me, it is me alone, and I am trying my best to find myself a job, that’s what I am doing. He is going on and on that its not fair for tax credit to pay us to sit down. And what is the father done and he is going to chase the father and if the father is working, then the father is going to pay us that money. ”

“ I saw one lady, she had a small baby, and the advisor gave her the forms and then the lady wasn’t happy and sort of went tsk, kissing her teeth. And the advisor was really pissed off, she humiliated the lady with the small child in front of everybody and she said to her ‘you are taking my money which I am working and paying for in my tax to pay for your child.’..... . No, nobody (the other advisors) telling her – it was like everyone was watching going ‘go on!’ ...And the way she speak to her – like the money you feeding your child with, it comes from me – its my tax your feeding your child... really it makes you angry and feel like its not fair, another human being to be sitting next to you to be humiliated like that ... ”

Perhaps the women felt a need to deflect the judgements they feel being imposed on them, and to point out that 'not everyone is in the same boat', and should not be lumped together.

Women talked about judgements they felt were made about them and others on arrival at the Jobcentre, according to what they were wearing and how they presented. One woman commented that "when I go in there I feel like before I have spoken to anyone, they look at me and the make an overall judgement about how I will behave."

“ You can see their body language or the way they talk to somebody... if you come in tracksuit bottomsthey wouldn't say 'so who have you come to see' ...they'll just make a phonecall probably or they'll support you upstairs or whatever.”

A number of women experienced direct, judgemental, comments from staff about items they were wearing – particularly if it was perceived to be a nice or expensive item.

“ I got Ugg boots from my kids dad 2 years ago for Christmas, that was the most expensive present he ever bought me, so I was really over the moon. But then, do you see where they are like 'where did you get the money for that' - I haven't physically bought it, someone gave it to me, but they're constantly 'hmm, we're going to watch you because you doing some dodginess...”

“ I even feel funny with my pushchair, because I know my pushchair was relatively expensive, and some of the staff know this, so ... I have had comments 'that's a nice pushchair, bet its not cheap' ... to a certain extent its not their business why I've got what I've got.”

Others noted that they wanted to make an effort because they wanted to counter the judgement that they were a failure.

“ I think I would definitely dress up because, you don't want people to view you as a failure. And it feels like if you are going to the centre sometimes they do view you like that, you want to present yourself in the smartest way possible.”

There were numerous examples of people being treated in a way that made them feel like a 'nonperson'

There were numerous examples of people being treated in a way that made them feel like a 'nonperson':

women were frequently kept waiting without explanation, told they would be sanctioned if they were late, were not allowed to take someone in with them, and found security guards guarding the door. The feeling of being a nonperson was often expressed as being treated like a number:

“ when you sanctioned my money, did you see that as a sanction of a mother, a single mother with a young dependent, who is reliant on this money. Or did you just see it as an NI number, and you pressed that button, and sanctioned my money...”

“ I think its all about numbers when it comes to them, really. Getting people off the books.”

Respondents' difficult experiences at the Jobcentre, and perhaps other services, seem to lead to cycles of judgement and shaming.

Being treated in a way which felt like it robbed them of their personhood led some to have stories about Jobcentre workers as inhuman 'automatons.' Such judgements perpetuate division and conflict. Our experience during citizens' jury sessions with staff from a local Jobcentre gave us a very different interpretation of their motivations. They were interested and engaged and seemed to want to make the system work for clients. The women in the jury,

in turn were responsive and willing to engage with them. Removed from the environment and processes of the Jobcentre, we were able to 'see each other as people'.

Being stopped by security at the door, having your name called out publicly and having an open plan office, perhaps sets up an environment in which the threat of being humiliated or shamed might feel constant.

“*Soon as you walk in you have a little welcome desk - not so welcome - with two security guards and they ask you to show them a card. Recently I had a different coloured card that was given to me by my work advisor. It was a white card, and the man was telling me I must show him a green card and I told him I haven't got a green card, this is the card I've got... Really! You coming in, and the first thing they are telling you is that you haven't got the right card. So it's like bleurghghgh.*”

The fact that interactions and conversations are public perhaps adds to this threat that you might be shamed or somehow exposed.

“*I have nothing to hide, because I am generally an open person. My concern is for people who have serious issues... I see lots of drug addicts using those facilities. They may want to, I don't know, get access to some sort of rehab - it's not the ideal place. I don't know if they have interview rooms? But things are coming out that really shouldn't be there in the open space where everybody comes to sign in. I think they need to create some sort of private room, for people who, you know, want to have discussions. But then again, the government is going to say that this is the Jobcentre, it's not really for counselling sessions where you can spill all and you know talk about the emotional problem of why you haven't found work...*”

According to DWP guidelines on service standards, private rooms are available for sensitive conversations.

The experience of the Jobcentre and welfare system seems to tap into and amplify existing feelings of shame or disappointment at not being in a position to provide for their families in the way they would choose. Or to

have realised ambitions for themselves that they might have had. Throughout the interviews people talk about wanting to work and valuing any opportunities to gain work experience.

A number of interviewees expressed quite complex, conflicted responses to their position as 'stay at home' mums. They felt that they want to work because it would give them 'self worth' and it would be 'not just being at home' and 'doing something worthwhile', and had absorbed the idea that paid work is what is 'worthwhile'. But at the same time, women talk about how time-consuming and demanding it is to be a mother, and how this is not something that the Jobcentre and the wider world understand. So on the one hand women seem to be being told, and to feel in themselves that 'what you are doing is not enough, you are not contributing enough' and made to feel shame and lack of self-worth for this. To some extent they feel that this can be addressed through finding formal paid work. And simultaneously, women are fighting that narrative - asserting that 'yes we are doing a lot, yes it is hard work and yes it should be acknowledged'. This complex response may shed light on research that finds that most mothers are keen to work - are women answering in ways they feel they have to, to avoid shame?

There seems to be an overarching feeling that being involved with the Jobcentre at all, is something that you want to shun, and protect your children from.

“*... I do want to go to work, but I need to find a job that works around me and the kids and the timing. Because it's like self worth, actually having a job, because then you're not the thing is that people understand that you are a mum, but your work is never done. I never stop working, even though I am at home...*”

“*I'm gonna be honest, I hate taking my daughter with me to the Jobcentre. I do not want her to see that life, do you know that I mean?*”

What's our story?

It is hard to build supportive relationships with people who are required to sanction us

Jobcentre staff represent the interface with the system for those who use it. Much of the anger and frustration which women felt was therefore articulated through their interaction with Jobcentre staff. Some respondents did express awareness and understanding of the challenging task Jobcentre advisors have. However there was much anger at specific instances of conflict or misunderstanding with individual staff, and respondents frequently saw staff as actively working against them. There seems to be negative judgements and recrimination on both sides.

Three women involved with the study described extremely positive relationships with Jobcentre advisors. In all those instances they felt the person understood their situations. The staff also went out of their way to support them – in one case even dropping round information about suitable jobs at a woman's home. Two of those three advisors have now left the Jobcentre.

Many women felt that advisors do not have time or energy to make the effort to understand where they are coming from. "They didn't take the time 'to sit me down to say 'this is what to expect, this is what's to be done.'"

“ She wouldn't just question me on what I am doing, she would be like, how do you think the research is going? How is it making you feel? And because she had actually been a lone parent herself, she could really empathise with how I felt and where I was coming from. So she would contact me sometimes and give me a call and say 'look if you look at the website, there's a job going that I think would suit your criteria, whatever else'. And those little things they... they boost your

confidence, it makes you feel good and it makes you feel like 'Ah, there's someone there that gives a damn'... I only had her for three months, but basically during that three months a lot of other advisors complained, because she wouldn't just rush you through, she would properly sit down with you, she'd do a proper job search and things like that, and they would complain because you're not meeting – I think it's quotas – time deadlines, things like that. She ended up leaving.”

Women felt that in the format of the interview and questioning there was no place for individual circumstances. The perception was that advisors 'don't care' about circumstances at all. Several women said that they felt staff were sometimes 'rude' and fobbed them off.

At the same time, some of the women could see why jobcentre staff might behave in a way that suggests they 'don't care.' One woman noted that 'people naturally judge people, on first impressions'. Others acknowledged that they did have to manage a lot of challenging situations and that it is very difficult to encourage and support people to work while you have to monitor and 'police' their actions: *"I get the sense the workers are under a lot of pressure, ... it seems like trying to do the impossible, it seems like they are trying to do it all, and it's not working very well."*

Women told us that they felt staff are often very constrained in what they can actually do. During citizens' jury sessions it seemed that Jobcentre staff were not able to comment on resources and targets. But we do know that they are obliged to follow government policy, for example encouraging everyone to find full time work. These kinds of targets and constraints are likely to mean staff have very little power to make decisions which they think might be helpful for their 'clients'. One woman noted that she explains what she needs to her advisor, but the response is 'this is the reality, we can't do this'.

“ I think they have very limited resources. Yet they are expected to help the community or society enormously but what can they help with if their resources are limited ... it leads to a very negative workforce as well... if you are consistently taking away from people and making cuts and taking the power away. There's no autonomy in the Jobcentre – they can't then feed positivity to the people that enter the Jobcentre.”

There is an inherent power imbalance in the relationship with advisors. Interviewees were clear that they feel it is impossible to build a trusting supportive relationship with someone who has the power to sanction you, or to make your life really difficult. Equally, it is likely to be difficult to build a trusting, supportive relationship with people when you are required to watch for ways to sanction them.

“ And when you try and defend yourself. You have to be very careful, because they have power. They can just stop your money, like that, without any reason whatsoever. And then if they do like you, they can also help you get access to free travel, even free childcare. But it is one of those things where if you don't have an advisor that knows what they are doing, and knows all the rules, and knows what their clients are entitled to, it can be very difficult for you.”

A number of women feel that experiences at the Jobcentre are dependent on 'who you get' as your advisor, and whether you have a good relationship with them. One woman said it seemed to be 'pot luck' who was sat in front of you, and how willing to listen and knowledgeable they were. Some women felt that other Jobcentre clients seemed to get more leeway, simply because they knew their advisors well, and they found this distressing. Jobcentre staff who attended citizens' jury sessions agreed that having a good relationship with your advisor is important, and recognized that this is not always easy. They acknowledged that having a good relationship with your advisor, could make a difference as to the level and detail of information about jobs and support available you might get.

Staff are often very constrained in what they can actually do

Women felt that experiences at the Jobcentre are often dependent on 'who you get' as your advisor, and whether you have a good relationship with them.

Respondents identified things in the way in which the system operates which undermine the possibility of developing good relationships with advisors, even if you could overcome the inherent power imbalance. These included the checks and barriers which characterised the experience of being in the Jobcentre; the very short time for interviews; the fact that you were often seeing different advisors; the lack of privacy and; the feeling that people are increasingly being sent to use phones and computers to find out the information they need rather than get face to face time.

Women we spoke to did not feel that there was any way to effectively make a complaint if a conflict did happen. Because of this, the women feel they have no power or autonomy in the relationship and must simply try and keep things as smooth as possible.

“ ...if you have a problem with somebody, or something's happened, you can't even say you're gonna speak to that person, coz if they're going to phone up and say 'and so and so is here to speak to you', that person can say to security they don't want to see you – so then you are stuck. ”

“ One time the lady made me cry and I asked to speak to a manager, not to even just report or complain about her as such. Just to complain about how the colleague had made me feel – and, whilst I was downstairs waiting they called the acting manager, who turned out to be the person that made me cry. Now obviously I not gonna want to talk to you about how you made me feel because when I was trying to talk to you about how you made me feel even more stupid –I ended up crying... ”

“ they ask you questions that are... It might not mean anything to them, but they are asking me questions that are personal to me. What have I done to look for work? How did I go about it? How do I feel about it? Now that to them's just a question. But to me they are personal questions that you're asking me and they are also questions that affect how I feel about myself.... So when you've got someone that doesn't look at you and they're just looking at the screen and at the piece of paper, its like do you actually care? Or are you just asking these questions because that's what the computer says you should ask... ”

There is an inherent power imbalance in the relationship with advisors.

Women felt that they were always having to expose themselves, explain themselves and make requests. The way in which this happened felt insensitive and at times made them feel vulnerable and uncomfortable.

This feeling was exacerbated by the lack of privacy:

“*In the room, you are closer to each other, so even when you are talking to them, everyone can hear your voice as well. And even she is talking to you so loudly, that the person over there, they can see they can hear everything basically. No privacy at all.*”

What is it like working at Jobcentre Plus?

Women we spoke to during the research were frequently frustrated at their interactions with staff at the Jobcentre. But we came to acknowledge some of the constraints these staff must work with. Staff from one Jobcentre Plus office in South London attended two of our citizens' jury events to explain some of the changes that are happening for clients on income support. These were very constructive discussions: everyone who participated stressed how valuable it was to share concerns and information. Unfortunately the visiting staff were not able to comment on working practices and constraints within Jobcentre Plus.

However, a number of Jobcentre staff have revealed in blogs and interviews how challenging the job can be. Staff who were moved over to the call centre service introduced in 2010 said they 'feel ill-equipped and helpless' when talking to distraught customers who are phoning up about options.²⁰ Another call centre worker writing anonymously on the Guardian Comment is Free blog wrote 'we have approximately five minutes to deal with each customer.'

'We have skills and experience to help customers but are not permitted to use them... the target culture can drive some odd behavior, such as cutting customers off, fobbing them off... If we fail to hit the targets, we are subject to harsh penalties and face the sack.'²¹

Another Jobcentre worker said that he had been reprimanded for the fact his team had not sanctioned sufficient people and said that while there "is no specific target ... it is and has been mentioned before that each signer should be looking at a minimum of 2 sanctions a day."²²

Nationally it seems that Jobcentre workers are experiencing an increase in verbal and physical abuse, as claimants vent frustration at sanctions and cuts to benefits.²³ The glimpses of these kinds of pressures provide some context for the difficult and at times hostile interactions reported by women who participated in our study. We have not yet been able to gather views and responses from people who work at the Jobcentre Plus. We hope to do this as one of our follow-on activities.

What's our story?

We often feel confused, deflated and frustrated

Women expressed mixed emotions. They appeared confused as to the intent of the Jobcentre. They were told it was there to help, but then experienced a place that punished, or controlled or checked up on you - spied on you even. Women felt disappointed - particularly those who had originally approached the Jobcentre voluntarily, seeking help to find work.

The emotional impact of this disappointment seemed to manifest itself in different ways:

Some expressed hopelessness. They felt deflated and demotivated after visiting the Jobcentre. One woman felt she had been 'knocked down' when she was prevented by the Jobcentre from progressing to higher level training at a point when 'I was confident, I was learning, I was ready to go out to work.'

A number described the environment and feeling of physically being at the Jobcentre as bleak, depressing and 'downheartening'.

“ It can put a dampener on everything that I want to do, you feel kind of negative about things in general because they tell you this can't happen or you won't be able to do that and then it just makes you feel like ok, this is the end.

”

“ You go in...its like.... I don't even know what colour it is. Maybe its just me, its like a grey cloud. Its like there's a grey cloud. That's all I can see.... most times there's been a good few times since I've been there that I've left and I've been in tears. ”



“ To be honest with you, I really feel like it's, I don't know if its the right wordclinical. It really feels like a place for, like, the lost souls to come and push a button. It just feels so, um, what's that word I am looking for... like almost dead. You go in, there is no life no vibrancy, there's nothing. You know, It looks so depressing to even walk into a Jobcentre. ”

Others expressed more anger and frustration, reported more frequent conflict with Jobcentre staff, and felt fobbed off and mistreated. They felt indignation and injustice, and made efforts to argue and appeal their case, and fight against the feelings they were experiencing.

“ They do fob you off, I'm sorry to say they do fob you off, and if they are late or something like that, they do rush you out and don't explain things in detail - and then you don't know what to do. And you can get sanctioned and struggle for two weeks without money! And it's a lot of money - you're left confused. ”

Some felt a heightened sense of anxiety as a result of the requirements of the Jobcentre (anxiety that they might be sanctioned for failing to meet requirements) and because of the kinds of work they are being pushed into. This was also linked to a wider anxiety about the uncertainty of the future and how they will cope practically and financially as services and support are cut.

People feel genuine fears about applying for jobs, doing interviews and how they will cope entering work. These are tied up in their experiences as children and adults, and in fears of being judged and shamed. They are also linked to fears about not being able to protect and nurture their children well. These are very real and important blocks that people face when it comes to finding work: a number feel that these fears and anxieties are not taken seriously and that the Jobcentre setting is not the appropriate space to address them.

“ [my advisor] started off by saying 'I know a few mums, and I know some of you younger mum where you go through a period of time where you don't have much confidence, because of the baby and stuff - I think it's a confidence thing with you because there isn't any reason why you aren't working, you've got a good work history'. So ...she tried to address it. Where we fell out, was because her job dictated to her that she had to pile on the pressure. ”

Several interviewees who responded seemed to feel indifferent or passive, resigning themselves to the task of signing on because they have to. Some developed strategies in order to go through the motions as efficiently and painlessly as possible: “Basically you just go there and smile... you know like following them, and just get out, get out of there.” As one respondent put it, it feels “more a benefit-dispensing machine as opposed to a place to go to genuinely find work.”

“ When I leave I feel.... Um... indifferently really, it doesn't phase me to go there, I go there because I need to go there, I can't do anything else, I just go there coz, whatever the situation you go there. ”



What are the stories that seem to be framing policy?

In preparation for our Social Action Conference, we explored the different 'stories' that seem to be framing policies. What kind of things do politicians say about people who are not working, or about poverty? How do they describe the aims of their policies? And what are we supposed to understand from their statements about the unemployed poor?

In a perfect world, the stories underlying policies would be based on thorough research and a clear understanding of what life is actually like for those, who for different reasons, struggle to earn money. But sometimes people come with their own assumptions and 'filters' and think they know the answer before even looking at the question. **Politicians know the power of language and stories. They use catchy phrases, over and over again, until we start to believe them.** Once we believe them, we accept the policies they lead to. Things are often presented to us, through the media, as reality and 'fact'.

So we felt we needed to examine some of the words, phrases and ideas that we hear repeatedly in media reports and the speeches of politicians. We wanted to think about the kind of stories these words, phrases and ideas build and how they relate to the stories of the women we interviewed for our research. How do these stories play out on a micro-level?

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) website clearly states that their reforms aim at

'simplifying the welfare system and making sure work pays'. More specifically they intend to 'make the benefit system fairer and **more affordable**, to reduce poverty, **worklessness** and **welfare dependency** and reduce levels of **fraud** and **error**.'

This points to a number of ideas that were picked up on by women we interviewed or who participated in citizens' jury discussions.

The story of the 'something for nothing culture'

Policy incentives to overcome barriers to work are almost entirely focused on financial incentives.

This is of course an important factor - people need to make ends meet. However, it should not be prioritised at the expense of other complex factors and blocks, which might make it difficult for people to enter work.

This focus implies that people are unwilling to do formal, paid work, would rather claim benefits, unless they are definitely going to get more money. An impression encapsulated by the phrase 'ending the something for nothing culture.'

This is not borne out by our research. We have found in our interviews that people have a variety of motivations for wanting to go into work. And a range of barriers to working.

One story that seems to frame current policy is that people will not take ‘responsibility’ of their own accord and that measures need to be put into place to force them to comply.

In May 2010 Secretary of State for Working Pension, Ian Duncan Smith said in an interview:

*‘Socially, everyone says: ‘You are a bloody moron – why are you doing this? You don’t have to do this.’ So taking responsibility is a real risk for you.’*²⁴

In a key speech shortly after becoming Prime Minister, David Cameron picked up on the same theme:

*“[There] is a moral hazard in our welfare system – people thinking they can be as irresponsible as they like because the state will always bail them out. ... I want us to look at toughening up the conditions for those who are out of work and receiving benefits and speeding up our efforts to get all those who can work back to work. Work is at the heart of a responsible society.”*²⁵

In 2013 Minister for Employment Esther McVey clearly articulated the story:

*“This government has always been clear that in return for claiming unemployment benefits jobseekers have a responsibility to do everything they can to get back into work. We are ending the something for nothing culture.”*²⁶

““ They even have a toll number where if you are suspicious that someone’s situation has changed, you call up. So they create this animosity amongst people – because your own family member can call up and say ‘up, I think so and so is working’.... make us all suspicious.”

““ The assumption feels like it is you’ve got benefit fraud sitting in front of you. And if you create a dynamic where there is loads of suspicion, it is more likely that people are going to be – you don’t trust me, I don’t trust you.

In the report *Journey to Work* recently published by Centre for Social Justice, a think tank founded by Ian Duncan Smith, there is a more nuanced understanding of the barriers of getting into work. But the default assumption remains the same:

*‘This would be a highly ambitious system in which everybody is expected to do something – young people who refused to take full responsibility can no longer expect open-ended support. The welfare system is a two-way process – help from the State must be matched by commitment from the individuals we are seeking to support. That is only fair.’*²⁷

The story seems to be that JSA claimants do not want to work and need to be forced to comply. This story is reinforced by media narratives and embedded in the questions and paperwork that happens between advisor and jobseeker. It helps breed the suspicion and mistrust at an everyday interpersonal level that women described. It also is likely to contribute to the increasingly strict atmosphere and punitive measures noted by research participants.

““ When...circumstance changes, [people need] to feel they can go and speak to their advisor without feeling like they are going to get interrogated –“ooh but why is this now that, this is changing.” That kind of thing, when you think, ‘well look, my circumstance has changed for whatever reason... I’m coming to you to say that that is the case. Why can that not just be the case?’”

““ I’m training right now – if anything had changed then I would let them know wouldn’t I. But they just ask you again and again. I don’t know. I guess just in case people don’t tell them. But I already know to tell them. It can be [suspicious] – some people are like that [may hide things]. I suppose, if they keep on asking, then someone might trip up or something. They do ask, are you doing any paid work or... all of that stuff.”

An important overarching story being asserted by key political elements is that the causes of poverty are located in social problems rather than economic or structural ones.

This is most strongly articulated in the Centre for Social Justice's analysis of the five pathways to poverty:

'what was trapping people was not necessarily the economy but their exposure to long-term worklessness, family breakdown, poor education, addiction and serious debt.'²⁸

This framing of the causes of poverty seems to shift blame onto individuals making poor choices, parenting poorly, not working at their marriage and so on. During one citizens' jury session, a researcher from Centre for Social Justice explained:

"You could have two families. Both in low paid work. And one of the families, their two parents may not have a high level of education themselves, but if they are there with their children saying its absolutely important you do your homework, you go to school – the life chances of that child will be significantly improved. Now you could take exactly the same family with exactly the same money. Exactly the same level of education. And if those parents didn't necessarily put that pressure on that child, and didn't encourage them in the same way. The life chances of that child would be significantly reduced. Now that's not something that gets factored... "

Citizens' jury members strongly disagreed with this framing of the causes of poverty.

“ *I am an example of this. I have experienced and I know what I am talking about.... Because we need to know the facts before politicians actually come and talk [unclear] to us and say that because of unemployment and this and that this is what causes poverty when it's the other way around. See I get very angry when they say things like that because its not the truth. I have been brought up in a family where I know if my parents had the resources, had the right.... It is poverty that caused them to not be well educated, because they didn't have the resource's see where I was growing up I didn't even have money to go to school. This is the reason why if I were able to attend, my attendance was better, I could have performed better in school and be more successful. So I know what I am talking about when we say that poverty is the way from [cause of] those things. And not the other way around. I can't sit and listen to that and keep silent.* **”**

“ *I really need to ask this question. So are you actually saying that the statements that you've just made that ... the cause of poverty... or steps to poverty are all this listed out: unemployment , education , addiction, family break up, debt. What about the poverty itself? Because I see these as .. reactions . These are what poverty can help cause. Because if somebody is very poor, there's a lot of stresses on them, so they can turn to drugs, they can maybe .. drink, they could maybe have breakdown of relationships because there's so much financial stress. **So I think they've got it the wrong way round. These to me are the consequences of being poor. Rather than causes of poverty.*** **”**

Welfare expenditure in general - and support for unemployed people in particular - is often painted as the cause of a 'soaring welfare bill' and the recession.

This story purports to explain why cuts to social security are being implemented: to make the system 'affordable.'

In fact, DWP's statistics show that pensions and in-work tax credits are driving the increased expenditure on welfare.

The claim that the number of people claiming out-of-work benefits is increasing year on year is not true.

In 1995, two years after the peak of the last recession, 17 per cent of people aged 16–64 were claiming an out-of-work benefit: by 2008 this was 11 per cent, and the 2008 recession only increased it to 12 per cent. Unemployment support is only a tiny proportion of the welfare bill: 2.6 per cent in 2011-2013.²⁹ This story also blames the 'inefficiency' and 'bloatedness' of the public sector and its staff for the recession. This is very misleading.

Another framing story seems to be that formal paid work of any description is what everyone should be aiming for - and ideally this should be full time work

Jobseekers are expected to 'be in work to find work'. Other activities - even those that might contribute in a broader way to society, such as volunteering and training in areas that suit their skills and interests, are less important and valuable. Under the Universal Credit 'in-work conditionality' regime people in work can be subject to benefit sanctions if they do not for instance increase their skills to get a better paid job.

A recent report from CSJ does acknowledge that it is more difficult for those with caring responsibilities to work longer hours. However the over-riding message is that it is always better for people to work longer hours, even if they have caring responsibilities. That the expectation is that you work towards having no financial support at all. We have heard women describing the pressure to

take full time work even though it clashed with care responsibilities. Others have been recently told that they are expected to spend 30 hours a week seeking work. Others felt that they were blocked from improving their qualifications or pursuing further training. Allowing the flexibility that parents need will require the reversal of these kinds of practices which have been observed over the past year.

“ she said to me that well, in the eyes of the government, I am already qualified to do a job. I dont need to do any more qualifications, they wont fund to increase my level – I would have to do that myself. But then she said, bear in mind that when you come up income support, the systems are in place now, you have to do a job regardless of if you like that job or not, or regardless if you feel you could improve in terms of your education skills. ”

The assumption is that once you are in paid work, you will move up the 'ladder' and out of poverty

During citizens' jury sessions, this was put forward as a key justification for pushing people into full time, low paid, insecure work. The expert witness from CSJ suggested:

“what you need to be able to do is say what's the ladder? How do I go from this job to a more secure job and a better paying job? And a job that allows me to do other bits and pieces. So I think always work is better than no work. But I think its really important as well that you are able to make that transition from flexible jobs, insecure jobs into more permanent employment.”

Research has shown that households in which someone is working are less likely to be in poverty. However there is also evidence that the link between working and moving out of poverty is far from automatic. An evaluation of the Lone Parent Obligation outcomes, by Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion found that while the scheme successfully moved people into work, it did not

do well on moving people out of poverty measures.³⁰ Single Parent Action Group also note in a recent CSJ report that 'It is much harder for single parents to train and advance their skills once they are in work' (with the additional pressures of caring for a child).

‘If single parents move into low paid, low skilled work, even where they have qualifications, then this work is unlikely to help them progress to become self sufficient and will mean that they continue to have to rely on in-work benefits.’³¹

Citizens' jury members also felt that moving up the ladder is extremely difficult.

“ I have been in this situation! You are actually in a very stressful job, working long hours for low pay and to actually move up the ladder is almost impossible. You are actually in a dead-end job. Technically you are in a dead end job. And its very difficult to move out of that. Because of the shift hours and so on. What time to train? what time to actually make that movement and that change? In work poverty is at an extremely high level. And you don't really hear about it. What about families who are working and are still in poverty. ”

A response to The Journey to Work: Welfare reform for the next Parliament

Last month, the highly influential Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), the think tank founded by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Ian Duncan Smith, which was the chief architect of the new Universal Credit system, published a report, The Journey to Work. It signals some changes in policy thinking, perhaps in the light of criticisms of the Jobcentre and Work Programme. In response to this, our group would like to say:

We welcome the idea of responsibility being shared

But we are troubled by the continuing language that seems to imply people are unwilling to take responsibility, and by the framing of the Claimant Commitment as 'responsibilities' when it seems actually to mean 'conditionalities' for receipt of financial support:

'This Commitment outlines what the claimant will do to give themselves the best chance of finding work. In return for state support, JCP expects claimants to do all they can to meet their responsibilities to return to work.' (p.85)

It would be interesting to explore ways of making this a two-way negotiation on a more equal level. This would mark a clear departure from what women have said about the agreements and 'consent' requests they have encountered before at the Jobcentre:

"They can see how long you've been there, they can see your notes, you can see everything – when you first sign up to it, they ask for consent but you can't exactly say 'no' can you!"

We believe that most people are already 'taking responsibility' to do the best they can with limited options.

We also believe that to take more responsibility people need to be given autonomy, power, control and trust.

We welcome the idea of 'working in partnership' between the state, JCP advisors and the person looking for work. We believe that combining the knowledge and views of these different parties will lead to better outcomes. We would particularly welcome efforts to respond to feedback and ideas from staff as well as clients at Jobcentre Plus.

We are concerned, however, that the power imbalances and negative judgements that we have heard played out between these partners might undermine constructive exchange if they continue. We believe working together will lead to more innovative, creative and sustainable solutions, but these partnerships need to be at an equal level. We would urge an exploration of ways to equalize relationships within the system.

We welcome the commitment to intensive support for people who have been unemployed for a long while, or have complex and challenging circumstances in their lives. In particular we welcome the recognition that it is difficult for parents of young children to increase their working hours.

But we are concerned that the language of ‘support’ might be misleading: intensive support remains within a framework of expecting people to find full time work or face punishment. For instance, in regards to the Claimant Contract, even “if a claimant is already working, it may set out what responsibilities they have, to find better paid work or work additional hours.”

We are also worried about proposals to base intensive support on a revised version of the Work Programme model. We think this is problematic given that our and others’ research ³² indicate that one to one support as delivered by the Work Programme has not met people’s needs – and has in fact at times obstructed their attempts to undertake training and voluntary work.

“I don’t really get support – I get criticized, like why haven’t you found a job? So I have to sit there for half an hour and criticize myself for not having a job. The new woman I’ve got, is making me go every Wednesday and sit down with her and explain myself, every week. I have to go on Monday and Wednesday.

I’ve been there for 2 years, and they still haven’t given me the one thing that I’ve asked, interview techniques. The things I have done, I have done for myself – the work I have found, I found for myself.

It’s driving me mad. It gets to you to a certain point where anything that comes up I am going to have to go and do it – because what I am living, every week in CDG (Careers Development Group – Work Programme provider in Lambeth) for three hours, its making me crazy she’s got pressure to make me get a job, making my life hell, so that they can get paid.”

Adhering to the requirements of the work programme will be especially difficult if people are working in low-paid, physically demanding work and have caring responsibilities.

We welcome the perspective that people have lots of potential, sometimes untapped, and the focus on helping them reach that.

But we have concerns about what seems to be an assumption that formal, paid work is better, more meaningful, more useful, than the other things people do: not only unpaid care work, but also voluntary and community work and training.

We share the concern expressed about high housing prices and low wages in the preface of the report. However, the solution of making it easier to move people for work seems odd. We worry that it might end up propagating a policy response which forces poorer people to leave their support networks, often the very things that will enable them to work, through providing practical help, childcare and moral support. You state in the report that this would always be by choice, and we would caution that this principle of it being a choice needs to be very carefully adhered to in practice.

We agree that history has shown that ‘economic growth doesn’t necessarily trickle down to our poorest communities’. We suggest that the social problems highlighted in the report have become entrenched precisely because the trickle down theory of neoliberal economics has not worked over the last 30 years. If the assessment of barriers to work for JCP clients is to be effective, it must recognise this, and take into account the complex interrelationship between poverty, unemployment (as a structural issue) and individual needs.

We disagree with your statement towards the end of the report that unemployment exists, ‘almost regardless of economic circumstances.’ We feel rather that unemployment is bound up in economic circumstances and inequalities.



Could we create a different story?

How can we create different stories that bring us together, rather than pit us against each other? Combine our different knowledges and perspectives to work out really innovative, creative ways forward?

We think we need stories which reflect our common vulnerability as human beings and acknowledge that throughout our lives, we depend on each other to meet our needs. Stories that enable us to work truly collaboratively.

We present here some of our ideas in an interlinked cycle. This cycle has four parts: framing stories, things we (policy makers and all of us) might try and do, every day practice, and reflection and evaluation. A change in any part of the cycle can trigger shifts in all the others.

This is a tentative start: we have only limited knowledge of policy-making. As the next phase of What's Our Story?, we want to find out about and explore different approaches and models that could fit into and help tell a different story.

To do that we need other knowledge and experience. On the back of this report, you will find a cycle similar to the one here. If you are interested in sharing your ideas with our group, please note them there, and send us a photo to

socialaction@theskillsnetwork.org

“ People working at and people going to the Jobcentre are closer connected to each other than somebody from very privileged positions – there are more similarities. But that can be quite frightening, and this can create strange reactions.”
(Research group member)

Somali women interviewed in a study exploring barriers to work in Tower Hamlets described how in Holland, new immigrants were assigned a 'social worker' who helped them with everything from where to use milk vouchers to how they could build on their existing skills to find work. They had found this support extremely useful.³³



Different framing stories

- We all have different things to offer: this should be embraced and encouraged.
- We all need support at different times: needing help does not mean you are 'weak' or not 'contributing'.
- People are trying their best to manage, often in difficult circumstances, and are taking responsibility. They have the whole picture of their lives, and make decisions in that context, based on their own realities. We need to think about what we mean by 'responsibility'.
- 'Work' and 'contribution' is not limited to formal paid work: unpaid work, such as care work is highly valuable. We need to be cautious and think about what we mean by 'contribution.'
- Other activities in life are important and valuable, such as creativity, social interaction and enjoyment. These contribute to building stronger communities, where people feel they are interacting, do not feel isolated, and feel that they belong.
- It is important to reflect on our own perspectives, biases and behaviour, and actively try to understand the perspectives of others.

“ Jobcentre staff are given a dual role. They are there to process benefits and give you employment support. And those two things are quite a distinct skill set. And we actually called for a much clearer split between those two activities. So actually it might be that you go in and you chat to the person that manages your benefits. And that might just be a five minute interview to make sure forms are up to date. But if you're going to talk about employment you want to spend a bit more time with that person. And make sure that you're seeing the same person and things like that.”
(CJ Expert Witness (CSJ))



“ Instead of saying 'jobsearch', we should say 'job ideas' – it's language that isn't restrictive... It's a whole range of things, and it sounds much more positive than 'jobsearch'. You are not being negated, you are not at 'a loss' it's about expanding, there are different ways, there isn't just one set way.”
(Research group member)

Things we might try and do

Policy-makers could:

- Explore models such as timebanking, which respond to local needs and recognise different types of contribution.
- Create inclusive, non-adversarial forums for people who work at the Jobcentre and people who use the Jobcentre to talk and explore where different challenges they face are rooted in shared problems and experiences.
- Try out peer-support models in which groups of jobseekers are facilitated to come together to share ideas and concerns and reflect on their circumstances.
- Train staff in tools and techniques that help foster non-judgemental communication, even when interactions are tense and difficult. Encourage regular reflection on their own 'filters' and assumptions, and how these might affect how they work with people.
- Work towards exchanges on an equal level, where power is shared between worker and 'client'.
- Explore holistic models of support in which workers have a full picture of the different challenges people are facing in their lives.
- Consider separating the work of supporting someone to enter work, and the work of checking up or dispensing social security.

We could all:

- Change the language we use to talk about social security and people who need it: shaping the language so that it is a truer reflection of what people experience.
- Actively watch out for and challenge language used by ourselves and in the media like 'scrounger', 'shirker versus striver'.

We have found that power differentials hamper effective communication and prevent people working well together. Acting like equals is not easy to do. We are influenced by Richard Sennett's work on difficulties and necessity of building reciprocity, respect and mutual regard.³⁴ We think this is an approach to public services that those making and enacting policy should explore.



Everyday practices that could happen at the Jobcentre

- Create a more child-friendly environment – maybe books for children, or allowing snacks.
- Encourage the use of the private space available for people to discuss sensitive issues and anxieties about work.
- Well thought-out and sensitively handled referral to relevant agencies that can provide support for entrenched emotional, social and practical issues that the Jobcentre is not equipped to address would be useful.
- Empower people with information about rights in work to address anxieties around work related issues.
- Have a more welcoming entrance.

Reflection and evaluation

- DWP guidance on service standards on Jobcentre Plus encourages feedback, but in practice this there does not seem to be much opportunity for. It would be useful to engage meaningfully with the feedback of people who use the service and people who deliver it.
- Incorporate the perceptions and experiences of people using the Jobcentre into measures of 'success', looking at how have they been impacted overall by going to the Jobcentre.

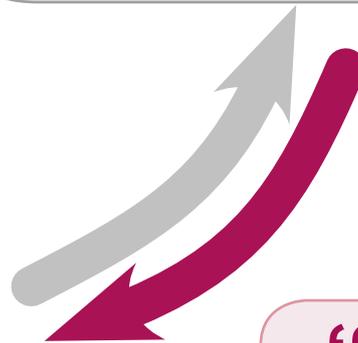
“ I think that policy makers should really start to try and listen, to people using the Jobcentre but also to people who are working in the Jobcentre ”

(Research participant)

“ there's actually very little quality control... they spend a lot of time looking at outcomes of jobs but they don't do things which used to happen sort of in previous programmes... customer satisfaction surveys ... observing interviews to check what was happening.... They do what they call compliance monitoring... but they just look at files, they don't actually observe what happens any more. ”

“ I would like this to be passed on to someone - that they listen to people who in the system. They can call me. Come to my house - spend a whole week in my house! And you can see exactly how it is. ”

(Research participant)



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**We want to build on this report
and explore the following:**

- Exploring the perspectives and experience of those working at Jobcentre Plus
- Exploring and testing different models of sharing power within services
- Exploring the links between narratives about 'mothers on benefits' and other narratives about women in wider society
- Exploring issues around in-work poverty

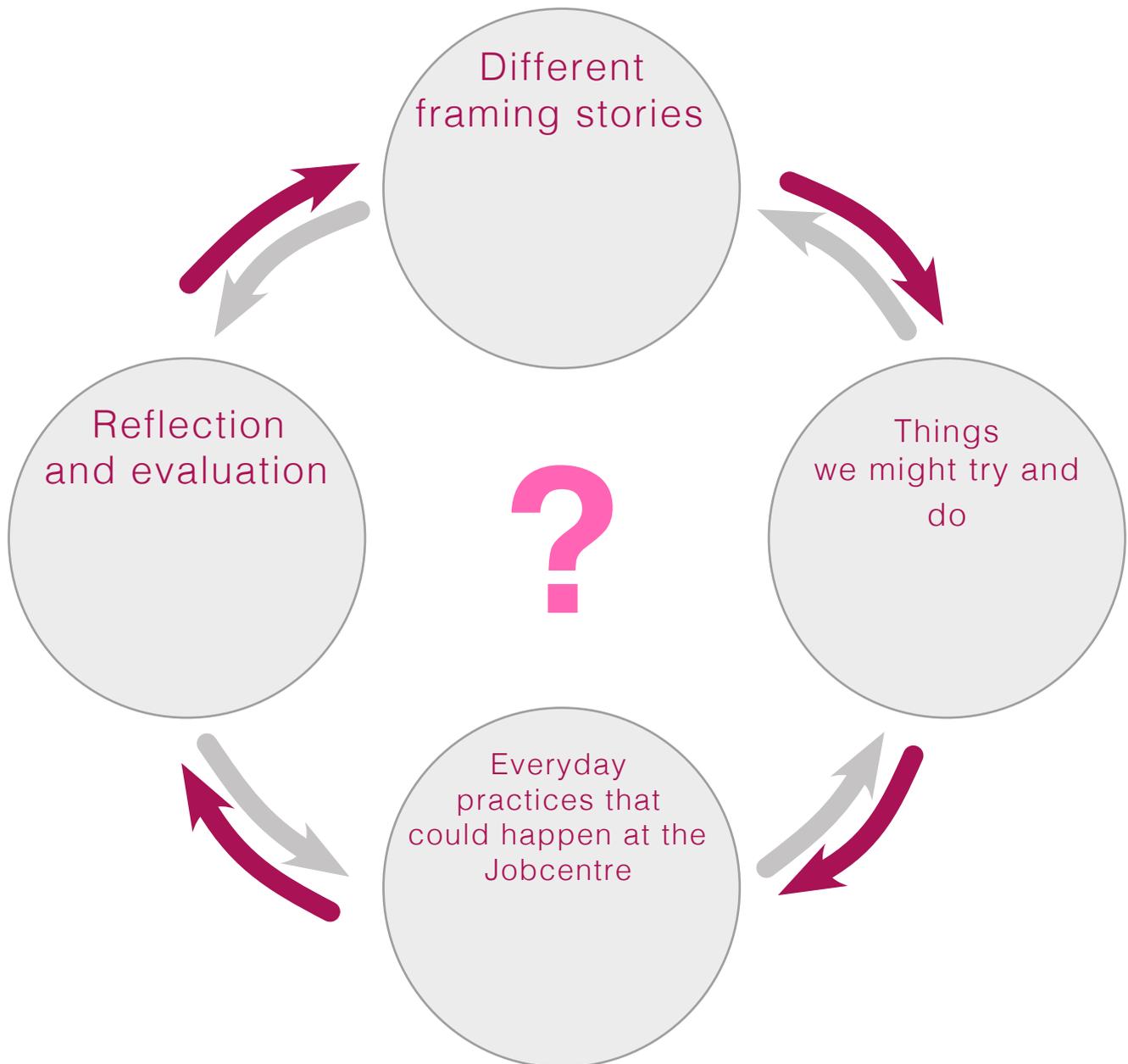
**Get in touch if you would like to
work with us on any of these issues!**

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What's your story?



If you are interested in sharing your ideas with our group, please note them here, and send us a photo to

socialaction@theskillsnetwork.org