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SUSTAINABLE HOUSING  
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# Hidden Young People in Salford

Exploring the experiences of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) and not claiming benefits

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Particular thanks goes to all the people who found the time to talk to us and answer our questions in a full, honest and patient manner. It is hoped that this report is able to accurately reflect their experiences.

This report is based on research undertaken by the study team and the analysis and comment thereafter do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Salford City Council. The authors take responsibility for any inaccuracies or omissions in the report.

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# Foreword

It is both a pleasure and also troubling to present the introductory foreword for this paper, an official collaboration between Salford Council and Salford University under our 'Salford Anti-Poverty Taskforce'.

It is a pleasure, because the Salford Taskforce shows what can be achieved when both our organisations work together to provide topical, rigorous research – challenging assumptions and government policy.

But it is troubling as the findings in this report are a damning indictment of the plight faced by young people across the nation and in Salford. They highlight the impact that conditionality regimes within the welfare system have had on our ability to effectively track, monitor and take care of vulnerable young people trying to make their way in the world.

A 'hidden' young person is created when that person drops out of the system, stops taking their benefits and often ends up in the informal economy. This research shows that care-leavers, the homeless, those with poor mental health and ex-offenders are most likely to find themselves in this situation. It shows that as an alternative to the social security system, many young people are opting for a life of temporary employment and cash in hand work, with few (if any) legal protections and exposure to crime.

A 'hidden' young person is not counted when government quotes the numbers of Jobcentre claimants. They are not eligible for support or training opportunities through our benefits system, and they are not counted in many different government statistics. Though it may be convenient for government to mask the real state of the British jobs market, until we commit to tracking our young people properly we will never have a realistic sense of the real state of youth under-employment, social isolation and engagement.

Our paper shows that our Jobcentres are failing these young people: that long periods searching fruitlessly for gainful employment leads to demoralisation and disengagement. It shows that lack of access to transport makes it difficult for many young people to continue travelling to appointments, and that many young people are embarrassed to claim the benefits they are entitled to.

And what happens when government and local government lose track of these individuals? We cannot know for certain; but we know that the world to which many of these individuals are exposed carries risks and insecurity.

Locally in Greater Manchester, we are making strides forward in representing young people through institutions such as the Youth Council – making sure that these voices are heard. But more needs to be done, and if government are genuine in their commitment to tackling youth underemployment and unemployment, helping those with particular needs and bringing young people into gainful work, they will seriously consider the recommendations laid out in this report.

It is often said, but no less true for that fact: our young people are our future. It's time we started taking proper care of them not just for their sake, but for society as a whole.

Salford City Mayor, Paul Dennett




# Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Aims and objectives	2
1.2 Methods	3
1.3 Structure of this report	4
<b>2. The experiences of hidden young people in Salford</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 Characteristics of the sample	5
2.2 Participation in employment, education and training: experiences, aspirations and barriers	6
2.3 Experience and perceptions of the benefits system	8
2.4 Supporting Hidden Young People – what works?	9
2.5 Conclusion	10
<b>3. Hidden Young People in Salford: Provider perspectives</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1 Numbers and characteristics: counting the ‘hidden’	11
3.2 Reasons for non-take-up of benefits	12
3.3 Supporting Hidden Young People – what works?	15
3.4 Improving support for hidden young people	16
3.5 Conclusion	18
<b>4. Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>19</b>
4.1 Recommendations for policy and practice	20
<b>5. References</b>	<b>22</b>

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# 1. Introduction



Since the mid-2000s, increasing numbers of young people have been struggling to make a successful transition from full-time education into work or further training opportunities (Sissons and Jones, 2012). As a result, nearly 2 million young people aged between 16 and 24 spend at least some time not in employment, education or training (NEET) (Impetus-PEF, 2017). Young people who are NEET are a diverse group who vary in their distance from the labour market; some are unemployed and actively looking for work, others are 'inactive' and not seeking work for a range of reasons including caring responsibilities, long-term disabilities or health conditions (Sissons and Jones, 2012). Young people's exclusion from employment, education and training opportunities represents a substantial social and economic cost which is experienced by individuals, the economy and wider society (The Prince's Trust, 2010).

While the number of young people who are NEET is important, there is growing concern about so-called 'Hidden NEETs' – those young people who are neither in employment, education or training nor claiming the benefits they are entitled to – referred to in this report as 'hidden young people'. These young people are not only denied financial assistance, they are also excluded from employment-related support offered through the Jobcentre (and other contracted providers). In recognition of the issue, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), in its strategy *'Our People, Our Place'*, commits to *'ensuring that fewer young people are 'hidden' from the essential support and services they need'*.

The extent, nature and experiences of hidden young people often go unreported (Brinkley et al. 2013; Edwards, 2017). However, an emerging evidence base suggests that the size of this group is significant. Approximately 480,000 young people are estimated to be hidden in the UK (London Youth, 2018). In Greater Manchester, the estimated figure is 21,890 (Gaskell, 2018). In Salford, the Council estimate that more than 2,000 young people are unemployed and 'hidden' from mainstream services and support at any one time (equating to about half of the total number of unemployed 18-24 year olds who are considered to be NEET in the city).

Very little is known about the lived experience of young people who are NEET but also 'hidden' from mainstream welfare services. This is the case both at a national level and locally in Salford. 'Hidden' young people receiving support from the Big Lottery funded Talent Match programme<sup>1</sup> were predominantly male, aged 18-20, and were living at home with their parents (Edwards, 2017; London Youth, 2018; Gaskell, 2018). However, outside of this analysis (which is based largely on service caseload data) a significant proportion of young women are 'hidden'. Brinkley et al. (2013), for example, drawing on national data, found that around three quarters of unemployed young men claim JSA, compared to just one half of unemployed young women.

A small body of existing research (Edwards, 2017; London Youth, 2018; Gaskell, 2018) suggests a number of reasons why hidden young people are not able, or choose not,

<sup>1</sup> The Talent Match programme provides support to young people who are considered to be furthest from the jobs market

to access support through Jobcentre Plus (JCP). These include a lack of appropriate documentation, difficulties in accessing or navigating the system, perceptions of JCP as 'unfairly punitive', and 'pride'. However again, this evidence base is weak and the local picture is lacking. Worryingly, the recent 'Sanctions in Salford' report produced by the Salford City Partnership highlighted disproportionate levels of sanctioning of young people both at the local and national level, and uncovered concerns from local Connexions service advisers about young people struggling to meet the demands of 'conditional welfare' which in some cases resulted in their disengagement from the benefit system.

### Key policies and interventions relating to young people who are NEET

A number of recent policy developments are likely to have impacted upon (and continue to impact on) young people who are 'hidden' and NEET.

The Youth Obligation is a new employment support programme for young people, which is being rolled out in Universal Credit full service areas. Policy detail is lacking, however it appears to involve a continuation of the trend towards more 'conditionality' (i.e. attaching more work-related 'conditions' to a benefit claim) observed across the welfare system: from day one of their claim, young people will be required to take part in an intensive support programme. Those remaining out of work for six months will be expected to apply for an apprenticeship/traineeship, or take up a work placement (see Work and Pensions Select Committee, (2017) for more details, Thornton et al. (2014) and Newton et al. (2016) for findings from early pilot work). It is important to recognise that most of the support offered to unemployed young people is contingent on their engagement with this system.

Outside of mainstream welfare provision, the Talent Match programme provides support to young people who are considered to be furthest from the jobs market, some of whom are hidden and NEET. This was a national programme funded by the Big Lottery but designed locally. An upcoming national evaluation of the Talent Match programme should provide further insights for developing effective provision for hidden young people. However, the future of this programme was uncertain at the time of writing.

Regarding education and training more generally, whilst policies focused on improving vocational pathways (including apprenticeships) have the potential to facilitate successful transitions into work, there are concerns that a lack of quality careers advice and guidance will prevent significant numbers of young people identifying a sustainable path into the labour market. On the other hand, early findings from a national evaluation of the

new JCP Support for Schools initiative, which provides information and guidance on vocational pathways and the soft skills demanded by employers, have been positive (see Roberts and Coulter, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

### Support for hidden young people in Salford

Local authorities have a duty to support young people to engage in education or training until the age of 20 (Education and Skills Act, 2008). However, following the government's recent decision to relax requirements for local authorities to track the activities of 18-year-olds (DfE, 2016), there is a concern locally that large numbers of young people, particularly those not following an academic pathway into higher education, are at risk of falling through the cracks in provision. Over the past year, Salford City Council has offered a specific service to hidden young people via its commissioned Connexions Service. However, levels of engagement have been lower than expected.

As a Greater Manchester authority, Salford has also been a key site for the Greater Manchester Talent Match programme. This 'local offer' aimed to be a positive, 'asset-based' approach, centred on young people. As part of this, services across the city including Salford Foundation, Career Connect and the Broughton Trust were commissioned to provide intensive tailored support to young people not in employment, education or training. According to the latest impact report, 320 young people were supported through the Talent Match Programme in Salford, including 122 who were 'hidden' (Lambert, 2018). In addition to national evaluation activities, lessons from local evaluations of these services will be important for designing effective local services in the future.

## 1.1 Aims and objectives

This research was commissioned in response to a weak evidence base, the recognition that current service provision was not working effectively, and as part of a broader aim to better support 'hidden young people' in Salford. As part of an existing partnership through the Anti-Poverty Taskforce, the University of Salford was commissioned by Salford City Council to conduct a research project which would enable them to better understand the needs and profile of this cohort and to help inform future commissioning plans and/or service interventions, at both a local and sub-regional level.

The overall aim of this project was therefore to provide an empirically informed understanding of the experience of a diverse range of hidden young people in Salford in order to inform future policy and practice. More specifically, this report addresses the following interconnected objectives:

<sup>2</sup> These findings do not necessarily reflect the views or impact of the scheme in Salford.



- To establish what is currently known about Salford's 'Hidden and NEET' population;
- To explore 'Hidden Young People's' experiences, prospects and aspirations;
- To provide an understanding of whether or not 'Hidden Young People' would benefit from more engagement with the mainstream welfare system, and how they could be supported to do so;
- To identify barriers to accessing mainstream welfare support and services (and ways to address these); and
- To explore the financial and social impact of hidden young people who are NEET within the wider household.

## 1.2 Methods

The research involved four key phases: following a desk-based review of existing evidence and a local consultation event, a qualitative approach was taken to explore the experiences and views of hidden young people in Salford, and wider stakeholders working with this group. These strands of the research are explained in more detail below. Fieldwork was carried out between June and September 2018.

### Desk-based review

This phase of the research involved a desk-based collection and review of existing information relating to both the extent and characteristics of hidden young people, at a national, regional, and local level. From this review, we identified only five reports focused specifically on this topic: Brooks (2014); Goodwin and Garry (2015); Edwards (2017); London Youth (2018); and Gaskell (2018). Key findings from these are presented above. This review confirmed a significant gap in the evidence base relating to hidden young people (both locally and nationally) and informed the development of research instruments (i.e. topic guides) used in subsequent phases of the research.

### Initial consultation event

Following the desk-based review, the research team hosted a consultation event at the University, involving a wide range of stakeholders from youth-related organisations and broader agencies who are likely to come into contact with 'Hidden and NEET' populations. This consultation event had several key aims: we presented an overview of the key findings from the desk based review (inviting stakeholders to share any additional evidence they were aware of); we invited participants to share what they think were the key issues with regards to this group and we asked them for advice and support regarding recruitment in subsequent phases of the research.

## Consultation with hidden young people in Salford

The key focus of this research was exploring the experiences and perspectives of young people who are 'Hidden' and 'NEET'. Following difficulties with recruitment (see below for more detail), the initial criteria were expanded to include those who had previously been hidden, even if they were not currently, so that their past experiences could be explored. In total we conducted 14 interviews with people who were 'Hidden and NEET' or previously 'Hidden and NEET'. Interviews took place in a range of locations including the participant's homes and a variety of community venues. All young people participating in this research were given a £10 shopping voucher as a 'thank you' for their time. Interviews were digitally recorded and verbatim transcripts were produced. These transcripts were then analysed thematically, guided by the key research objectives.

## Consultation with key stakeholders

In addition to interviewing young people, we conducted 4 focus groups with key stakeholders working in the city. In total, the focus groups involved 25 people. Participants were drawn from a number of agencies operating in Salford, including youth organisations, housing providers, education and training providers and Jobcentre Plus. Groups were organised thematically, with participants invited to attend the group most suited to their experience and expertise. These groups centred on: education and training opportunities, conditional support (i.e. Jobcentre Plus services and alternative 'non-conditional' provision), employment opportunities, and alternative sources of support. To ensure consistency, a core set of questions were asked across the focus groups, with additional questions relating specifically to the topic at hand included in each separate thematic group. The topic guide for the 'conditional support' consultation was written with assistance from the Youth Panel, a group of young people engaged with Greater Manchester Talent Match with experience of working with Jobcentre Plus services with the aim of making them more 'youth friendly'. This helped to ensure that the key concerns of young people fed into the research design process. A further consultation event was then held with members of the Youth Panel in which emerging findings (regarding conditional support) were sense-checked and implications considered.

## Finding the 'hidden': a note on methodological challenges

Engaging with a group who are by definition 'hidden' has been challenging. This was not unexpected – as noted above, previous research which has sought to explore the lived experiences of 'Hidden NEETs' has suffered from very low sample sizes. With this in mind, extensive efforts were made to promote the project to stakeholders across Salford from the outset. In addition to an initial consultation event, in which the rationale and methodological approach to the research was explained, and advice and assistance with recruitment was sought, all focus group participants were asked to identify any 'hidden young people' they were aware of who would be willing to take part. A call for participants was sent out through both the research team's and Salford City Council's networks, including Salford's Youth Employment Partnership (YEP). Further relevant organisations were identified through targeted internet searches and the research was promoted via social media. However, few agencies were able to connect the research team to hidden young people in the city. Participants were recruited predominantly via three local Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations, and two housing providers.

In addition, a member of the research team accompanied a community development worker from one of the third sector organisations on outreach on Salford's streets. Informal conversations with young people found this way were particularly rich in detail, but some of these individuals were not willing to go on the record about their status and the details of their reasons for being 'hidden'. A number of other early contacts did not lead to full interviews when the individual concerned withdrew. In some cases, this was because they were unwilling to have their details recorded or provide written consent. This has a number of implications for any further research investigating this issue – recruitment challenges should not be underestimated. This considered, 14 interviews represent a substantive evidence base and provides new and unique insights into the experiences of 'hidden young people' in the city.

## 1.3 Structure of this report

This report presents the findings from the consultation undertaken with hidden or previously hidden young people living in Salford and a range of local stakeholders working across the city. The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 presents an analysis of the findings from interviews conducted with hidden young people

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of the findings from the focus groups with wider stakeholders.

Chapter 4 brings together some concluding comments from the research, and offers recommendations for policy and practice.



## 2. The experiences of hidden young people in Salford



This chapter presents the findings from our consultations with young people living in Salford, who had experience of being both 'NEET' and 'Hidden'. Interviews with 14 young people were conducted between July and September 2018. In these interviews we explored their experiences of employment, education and training; perceptions and experiences of support from the Jobcentre Plus and other local services; their aspirations going forward; and how support for 'hidden young people' can be improved in the city.

### 2.1 Characteristics of the sample

A diverse sample of 'hidden' and 'previously hidden' young people were interviewed as part of this research. Tables 1-6 provide an overview of some key characteristics. Eight were currently 'hidden' i.e. were both not engaging in employment, education or training and not claiming unemployment benefits. Six had previously been in this situation. Most were White, male, and between the ages of 18-20. The prevalence of self-reported mental and physical health problems was

low (particularly compared to other research conducted on this topic). Several indicated that they had learning difficulties (in most cases this was mild dyslexia). For some, a period 'hidden' and 'NEET' had been a short term experience. However, for the majority (nine), they had been in this situation for 12 months or more.

At the time of interview, four (previously hidden) interviewees were living in supported accommodation provided for homeless young adults. One (previously hidden) young person was now living in their own home, while the remainder were living with their parents. None had been in formal care institutions. However, several described early 'chaotic' home lives. One young man, for example, described being thrown out of his home by a family member after he refused to go to college. In terms of caring responsibilities, two women (who were previously 'NEET' and 'hidden') had since had young children, while two (one 'hidden' and one 'previously hidden') were providing significant care for older family members. One disclosed that they had a criminal record.

**Table 1 - Hidden/previously hidden**

■ Hidden	8
■ Previously hidden	6

**Table 2 - Gender**

■ Male	9
■ Female	5

**Table 3 - Age**

■ Under 18	1
■ 18-20	10
■ 21-25	3

**Table 4 - Ethnicity**

■ White	12
■ BME	2

**Table 5 - Health conditions/disabilities**

■ Physical health condition	0
■ Mental health condition	2
■ Learning difficulty	3

**Table 6 - Length of time 'Hidden' and 'NEET'**

■ 0-3 months	3
■ 4-11 months	2
■ 12 months+	9

Six had left school without GCSEs, and five had been excluded from either school or college for disruptive behaviour. Being excluded had made them reluctant to take up further learning opportunities. One young man, for example, explained how after being excluded from college, he *'just gave up'* (Hidden, male, age 23). However, for those who had progressed to further education after school, this had not necessarily led to successful outcomes in terms of either employment or further study.

Despite this, several interviewees were keen to re-engage with education or training:

I didn't really take part in school. I was a bit naughty in school. I wish I could go back now, though (Previously hidden, male, age 18).

Many had completed a variety of training courses in the past, or were currently undertaking them, through the encouragement of agencies including accommodation providers and young people's advice services.

## Employment

The majority of interviewees had engaged in some form of paid work; however, the formality of this varied. Labour market experiences were characterised by temporary, manual, and low skilled work (such as warehouse work, telesales, and retail). Participants described a range of reasons for losing these jobs – including non-renewal of temporary contracts, friction with other employees, and dismissal due to lateness.

## 2.2 Participation in employment, education and training: experiences, aspirations and barriers

The young people we spoke to had mixed experiences of employment, education and training. However, several key themes emerged across the sample.

### Education and training

Whilst there were some examples of young people enjoying school, with some progressing onto and achieving further qualifications in college, most interviewees described negative experiences of education. Several interviewees explained that they had struggled in school due to having dyslexia and not receiving appropriate support. Others had simply not been able to find a course of study which would sustain their interest. Six had started college but had since dropped out of their courses or been told to leave.

[[I went to college for a couple of months, didn't like that either, and then I went to another college ... that was all right but they put in work placement - I did the work at one work placement but it takes ages, I never just bothered, so I just left and never went back. (Hidden, female, age 19)



A significant number of participants had engaged, or were engaging in the so-called 'grey economy'. 'Cash in hand' work (including roofing, window cleaning, and removals) was described by several as their main way of obtaining an income. One interviewee had given up their college course to work cash-in-hand for a family member. Working in this way could last for an extended period – one respondent, for example, had been doing this for several years on and off:

Doing roofing and stuff like that, just cash in hand jobs.  
(Previously hidden, male, age 20)

Word of mouth was the fundamental mechanism for securing employment opportunities (whether formal or informal).

He asked his dad, because it's his dad's company, so he just said, 'You want to work with us?' I just said yes. (Previously hidden, male, age 20)

In addition, whilst reflecting on the past few years, the same interviewee explained that his personal aspirations during the time were very limited:

I didn't really think about anything, to be honest. I don't know. I was just still growing up, to be honest. (Previously hidden, male, age 20)

Whilst a small number were not able to articulate clear career goals, across the sample, several young people talked about their long term ambitions of careers in a range of sectors including retail, travel and tourism, midwifery, mechanics, working on the railways, serving in the Army. One respondent wanted to run their own business. For several participants, construction was

viewed as an attractive sector to work in as it was felt that there was plenty of work available in this sector, opportunities were locally based and the pay was good:

Ideally, I want to get into construction, because I've been told a lot about it and how they're always looking for people for work and stuff, and how you can earn good money as well. So I just think that's a good route to go through really.  
(Hidden, male, age 20)

Some respondents were beginning to work towards these aims. Several previously hidden young people were currently working towards (or were about to start) qualification in construction. In addition, one young woman was planning to study a professional course at University to become a midwife.

## Barriers to participation

When asked about barriers to participating in employment, education or training, interviewees commonly spoke about prolonged periods of unsuccessful work search:

No, it's just hard. You never get information back or never get phone calls back, texts back off them. (Hidden, female, age 19)

As time went on with rejection after rejection, several spoke about losing confidence and 'giving up' on finding work. This was particularly the case for those not receiving support from any local services.

Once you keep trying and trying and just getting knocked back down, you're just like what's the point? You just kind of give up. (Hidden, female, age 25)







A lack of access to affordable and reliable transport was also significant for those trying to engage in employment, education or training. A number of interviewees gave examples of where they had been unable to sustain their attendance on courses, or get to work on time.

I couldn't get no buses up there because of all the buses stopping because they were doing works up the roads and all that. (Hidden, male, age 20)

I didn't really have enough money to travel far for college so I just put it off. (Hidden, male, age 20)

## 2.3 Experience and perceptions of the benefits system

All interviewees had experience of being both 'NEET' and 'hidden' i.e. not claiming the benefits they were entitled to. A variety of reasons were put forward for not claiming. Several were unaware (or had been unaware) of the benefits available. However, for some, the 'stigma' associated with claiming benefits meant that they did not want to engage with the social security system. Several young people felt that having to walk into their local jobcentre would be embarrassing, and did not like the idea of having to tell people they were claiming benefits.

Like if someone said to me, 'Where do you get your money from?' I think I'd be a bit embarrassed to tell them. (Hidden, female, age 20)

Others had a negative perception of those who were claiming benefits, and did not want to be associated with them.

It's scruffy. I won't lower myself to claim. (Hidden, female, age 19)

For others, it was the conditions attached to receiving benefits which deterred them from making a claim. One 20-year-old man, for example, explained that a need to undertake intensive job searching, combined with a lack of tangible support, meant that he did not see any benefit to engaging with the social security system:

I just don't want to go, like. Basically, you've just got to go, haven't you, like sign a sheet, go and see someone for five minutes and then go back home. I just can't be bothered doing that..... you have to sit there for hours and look for jobs. (Hidden, male, age 20).

This was felt by several respondents to present a major barrier for young people's engagement with Jobcentre Plus, preventing them from accessing support. Some explained that there was little incentive to apply for benefits and fulfil all the conditions attached to claiming for welfare payments that were far below what could be obtained from earning through cash-in-hand work or relying on parents.

A lot of kids don't want to go to the jobcentre every week and don't want to do the job searches every week... so it's just one of them things, isn't it? Like young people don't want to sit down for an hour a day doing job searches or going to the jobcentre every week to go and do what they've got to do. (Previously hidden, female, age 21).

Three had become 'hidden' following earlier periods of claiming, in which they had had a negative experience of Jobcentre Plus services. These previous experiences had discouraged them from 'signing on' again. One young woman, for example, had survived for two years without benefits or work. When asked why she had not applied for unemployment benefits, she recalled the feelings of humiliation attached to earlier periods of signing on, which included being sanctioned for missing an appointment:

They're not nice people. They act like they're better than you and that makes you feel angry because even though you are signing on, it's not like you've never worked before. It's just not a nice place to go, so I'd rather have nothing than go and sit in their presence (Hidden, female, age 25)

However, for several individuals, negative perceptions of Jobcentre Plus services had developed even though they themselves had no direct experience of interacting with them. Instead, several had been deterred from making a claim after observing the negative experiences of others. One young man stated that he knew many people who were in receipt of benefits, but who had not been helped into work. This suggested to him there was no practical advantage to signing on. Furthermore, hearing about the negative experiences of others had provided a further disincentive to engage with Jobcentre Plus:

They used to always say negative stuff about it..... I just thought well, if they're going through such a bad time with the jobcentre and stuff like that, then I'm not going to put myself through that then. (Hidden, male, age 20)

It is striking that, where young people who had previously been 'hidden' had subsequently made a claim for the benefits they were entitled to, they had only gained access following encouragement and a sustained package of support from other local services. Prior to this, their understanding of available benefits and support was limited.

I didn't know that I could claim... until I was told by the people from [accommodation provider]... If not, I wouldn't have known. You hardly hear it from anywhere, these things. (Previously hidden, female, age 18)

This resonates with findings from a recent research project conducted by the Greater Manchester Talent Match Youth Panel, which explored young people's perceptions of Jobcentre Plus.<sup>3</sup>

One respondent, who had been supported in this way, had subsequently had a positive experience of support from Jobcentre Plus:

They provide the jobs, and there's like a letter, I think, with jobs on it that suits you, and you go on the site as well, and you apply, and a few days later you get like a phone call for something. (Previously hidden, male, age 20)

In the absence of income from either employment or the benefits system, participants described a range of alternative sources of income. These included 'cash in hand' jobs (as described above) and drawing on in-kind support through a local food bank.

Many of the participants had been able to draw on monetary support from parents. As this was not typically a significant amount, one participant suggested this could be rather isolating:

[I get money from] my mum and my dad... I don't really go out (Hidden, female, age 20).

This situation could cause friction within families as young people felt under pressure from their parents to either find work or claim benefits in order to contribute to the household finances. However, they were still reluctant to 'sign on', for the reasons presented above:

[Mum] says either get out the house or you go and claim, and pay money for keep. (Hidden, female, age 19)

[Mum] was sick of paying for me (Hidden, female, age 25)

Two participants disclosed that they had resorted to criminal activity in the absence of income from other sources:

If it wasn't for [local support organisation] I really don't know if I still be selling on the streets. (Hidden, male, age 18)

I was robbing things and I was just finding different ways to get my own money, lending it off people, getting myself in debt (Previously hidden, female, age 21).

Informal conversations with a number of 'hidden young people' while accompanying a third sector organisation outreach worker suggested that drug dealing was another way of 'getting by'.

## 2.4 Supporting Hidden Young People – what works?

It is notable that across the accounts, interviewees struggled to give examples of any tangible careers advice received through either school or college. Advice about their entitlement to support through the mainstream welfare system was also largely absent from official sources.

Whilst most were not engaging with the jobcentre, the majority of the sample were receiving support from local services to access employment or training opportunities – including VCS organisations, and housing providers. Crucially, those engaging with such support considered these services to be providing a high quality support offer, providing useful advice and support relating to CV writing and access to meaningful training opportunities. Whilst engaging with different services, participants were complimentary about personalised support. In the words of one young person, their current support worker '*would help you find stuff that suits you*' (Previously hidden, male, age 20).

Across the sample, there was a high degree of confidence that their engagement with such services would lead to meaningful training or employment. Several spoke about the importance of ongoing encouragement, particularly following prolonged periods of being NEET, and were keen to stress the value of the trusted relationship they had built up with project workers:

If I didn't come to the [VCS organisation] and if [name of worker] didn't help me.... I probably still wouldn't be in work now. (Hidden, female, age 25)

I feel less alone with it, because I felt like I was just running around in circles really, like trying to do it all myself. I feel like she's given me a bit more courage to know that there is something out there for me. (Hidden, female, age 20)

Without such help they did not believe that they would have made progress. When asked about the impact of support from a local VCS provider, one young man was clear that if he had not accessed it, he would '*be sat at home in bed watching Netflix now, that's where I'd be, with my feet up*' (Hidden, male, age 20).

One participant contrasted this with the lack of support they had received from Jobcentre Plus:

I've had a few job interviews from [local VCS organisation], what they've got for me. Just building CVs and stuff like that..... jobcentre hasn't supported me for any kind of training, or work, or anything like that. They've not even offered me anything like that. (Previously hidden, male, age 18)

<sup>3</sup> See <https://gmtalentmatch.org.uk/news/research-findings-now-available-jobcentre-plus-provisions-and-young-people-0> for more details.

Significantly, the support interviewees were engaging with was largely 'non-conditional' – individuals did not have to meet certain criteria in order to participate (i.e. being on a particular benefit, out of work for a certain period, etc.), or provide evidence to back this up, nor was attendance mandatory. While there was an understanding that progress was contingent on commitment, the choice of whether or not to engage ultimately lay with the person themselves.

However, a small number were aware of local support services, but had not been convinced by their offer. Two participants, for example, had engaged with these services after insistence from family members that they get support, but had since withdrawn.

They weren't helping at all... so then I just stopped going there (Hidden, male, age 20)

When asked why this was the case, they struggled to articulate reasons for this. It is possible that because their engagement with the service had followed insistence from family members (rather coming from their own motivation to engage with the service) this had led to a lack of 'buy in'.

This underlines the fact that in supporting young people, there is no 'one-size-fits all' solution. Instead, a range of services, which they recognise the value of, are required.

## Promoting support

Most of the young people included in our sample wanted support to find work or identify suitable training opportunities. However, several had struggled to find support. As one young person described:

I just didn't know where to look. I've never known where the support was. (Hidden, male, age 23)

Another was surprised by a lack of employment-related support available to them:

I thought there'd be a lot more support than there is. (Hidden, male, age 20).

Word of mouth was the fundamental channel through which the young people in our sample heard about employment or training opportunities and wider support services. Of those engaging with local services, several had learned about the service through outreach activities. One respondent, for example, explained how a local VCS worker hosted a weekly drop in session at their supported accommodation provider:

There's a lady that usually comes every Thursday and she usually sits there and she helps with, if you want to look for a job, things like that. (Previously hidden, male, age 18)

However, most had heard about the support available through friends and family members. Coming from trusted sources within their peer group, these testimonies had led to their own subsequent engagement in the support available:

One of my cousins, they were there and they've helped and stuff ...so he told me about it. Then I contacted [name of worker] and then he got me in here straight away. (Hidden, female, age 25)

In one instance, when asked how they had come into contact with the service, one young man explained how they had by chance overheard the project worker in the pub:

He 'was talking about getting people jobs and that. Obviously, because I wasn't working, I went over to him and asked him and seen what was going on..... I went over to him and asked him ... so he was like, 'Yes, I help young people like yourself to get jobs. Are you looking for a job?' I was like, 'Yes, I need a job,' and he was like, 'Yes, I'll book you in and come into our office the day after.' Then we done loads of stuff and it's dead good.' (Hidden, male, age 20).

Similarly, another respondent heard about the employment support on offer through their social housing provider, again by chance, while another family member was receiving support from them to resolve another issue.

While this underlines the importance of local knowledge and connections in terms of effectively promoting the support on offer, it also suggests there is a serious risk that some hidden young people will never come across these opportunities. It also underlines the role of social networks and how potentially misinformation can be transferred – for example, where poor perceptions are widespread, this can exclude people from a service which is viewed positively by some.

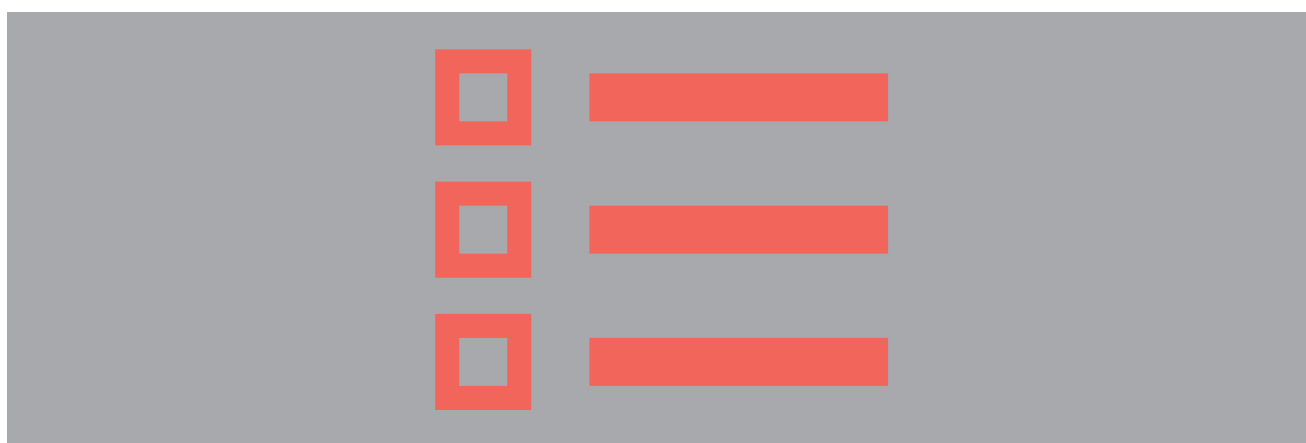
When asked how local service could reach more 'hidden young people', respondents were clear that the available opportunities needed to be promoted more effectively to young people in the city. They suggested making better use of social media networks in this regard.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented evidence on the experiences and views of young people living in Salford, who had experience of being both 'NEET' and 'Hidden'. Whilst a diverse sample, a number of common themes emerged across their accounts, including limited sustained engagement in education and training, poor quality labour market experiences, and negative perceptions of Jobcentre Plus services. Most felt in need of support to access local training and employment opportunities, and had engaged with agencies providing a trusted and personalised service, following assertive outreach from these services.



# 3. Hidden Young People in Salford: Provider perspectives



This chapter presents the findings from the consultations with wider stakeholders in Salford. Four focus groups were conducted in June and July 2018, including a total of 25 participants. These stakeholders included local advice and support agencies, education and training providers, and local council officers. An additional interview was undertaken with a service provider unable to take part in a focus group. The purpose of these consultations was to explore the experience and perspectives of those working with young people in Salford, and consider how hidden young people could be better supported across the city.

## 3.1 Numbers and characteristics: counting the 'hidden'

In each focus group, we asked participants about their awareness of the nature and scale of the issue of 'hidden young people' in Salford. It was apparent from the accounts of the variety of stakeholders consulted, that data on hidden young people were neither routinely nor consistently collected. For example, representatives from Salford City Council explained that they had no duty to collect data on this issue:

As a council, we don't have statutory duty to collect it. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

Whilst estimates had been made regarding the scale of the issue of 'hidden young people' in the city, respondents were sceptical about the accuracy of these data.

Several advice and support providers were, however, collecting data on the status of their caseload. As one provider explained:

When you see young people, you record in our database if they're claiming or not... We do have a lot of young people that don't claim. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

In addition, those young people who do claim benefits, but who then subsequently disengage are asked to provide a reason for terminating their claim; however, it was felt that this provided little insight, and was not something that was shared outside of the local Jobcentre Plus services:

They are asked [why they are terminating their claim]. If they call the call centre to close the claim over the phone, they're asked. They can just say, 'Because I don't want to claim anymore.' That is acceptable as a valid reason. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

However, several participants reflected that data on those not engaging with any provision was largely absent.

We don't know. We don't know who else is out there. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

### Who is at risk of becoming hidden?

Stakeholders felt that a number of different 'groups' of young people were more at risk of becoming 'hidden' and 'NEET' than others. There was a general agreement that those at the upper end of the 18-25 age bracket were more likely to be disengaged.

For each year after they've left school they start losing faith, don't they? (Stakeholder from employment opportunities focus group)

In addition, participants felt that those with a higher likelihood of becoming 'NEET' and 'Hidden' included; care leavers, ex-offenders, young people experiencing homelessness, young people with health issues (in particular poor mental ill health), those dropping out of school or college, and those with caring responsibilities for older family members and younger siblings. On a recent traineeship, for example, one respondent explained that several of the participants had caring responsibilities (although they were not officially designated as carers), which had impacted on their ability to engage with and benefit from the programme:

That's stopping them from accessing the training. It's stopping them from moving into work or being available for work. (Stakeholder from employment opportunities focus group)

One attendee observed that discussions on young people who are NEET tended to default to young White British adults because most service users were from this background, yet it was known that levels were high in other ethnic groups. When asked which ethnic groups were more at risk of becoming hidden and NEET, Gypsy and Traveller community members were mentioned first, in part because of the number on Elective Home Education or out of school. The Jewish community was also highlighted by one respondent. However, they perceived that there was a reluctance to engage with support offered outside of the Jewish community:

The general response was that the community's sorting it out. That they were going to deal with that in-house (Stakeholder from alternative sources of support focus group).

Several respondents felt that the reduction in school budgets had led to less support for students with emotional or behavioural issues while the focus on core curriculum and exam results took attention away from lower ability groups and those more likely to do a vocational route. Stakeholders explained that, while those young adults transiting from post 16 learning to higher education continued to be monitored fairly well, those who do not follow this path are tracked much less, and there was little support to manage their transition. There was a consensus that after age 18, services for these young people (and the monitoring of their situation) *'dropped off a cliff'* (Stakeholder from alternative sources of support focus group):

The transition support from primary to secondary is pretty good and then from secondary to college or wherever, it's getting better. We're putting some systems in place but, you know, 18-year olds... (Stakeholder from education and training focus group)

To some extent, these beliefs concerning key groups who are more likely to become 'hidden' and 'NEET' correlate with the background of the hidden young people in our sample. However, none were care leavers, only one disclosed that they had a criminal record, and health issues did not appear widespread. Broadly speaking, the diverse profiles described by stakeholders and reflected in the sample emphasise the diversity of situations and experiences of hidden young people, which underlines the need for a varied support offer and creative outreach methods.

## 3.2 Reasons for non-take-up of benefits

Participants suggested that there were a number of reasons why some young people did not claim the benefits that they were entitled to. These included the stigma associated with claiming benefits, negative experiences and/or perceptions of Jobcentre Plus services, an inability or unwillingness to meet the conditions associated with a claim for unemployment benefits, and the influence of family and friends. These responses chime with the accounts of hidden young people themselves, presented in the previous chapter. Evidence on each of these from the wider stakeholders is presented below.

### Perceptions and experience of Jobcentre Plus services

Several respondents spoke about the widespread stigma associated with claiming benefits, and how this prevented young people from engaging with Jobcentre Plus services:

It's very much about this stigma that surrounds the Jobcentre Plus ... I think unless that starts to change, and people's perceptions are changed, [the situation won't improve] (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

A number of respondents felt that it was the 'perception of' rather than the actual experience of Jobcentre Plus services which prevented young people from engaging with it:

Ninety-nine per cent of people that turn up day one stick with it. It's just getting them to day one. That's where the problem is. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

It's down to your information and how youth friendly is your information? Where is the information and how do we break down those perceptions? (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

One representative from the local jobcentre spoke of their frustrations when young people were not accessing the support they were entitled to:

The young people we get through the door, we've got tons of support on offer for them...If we get them to engage... they, for example, do what's known as a sector-based work academy which is generally a period of training with... job interviews at the end of it.... It's just if they don't engage with us, we can't tell them what we've got. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

However, for others, poor experiences of Jobcentre Plus services had led young people to disengage. In particular, the conditions attached to a young person's benefit receipt were felt to be a key driver of their disengagement:

They've had authority for ever from school or if they've been engaged with the police or the services or social services or whoever. It's just another person in authority that's just going to tell them what to do. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

As these quotes demonstrate, a perceived 'hostile environment' was another reason why participants felt some young people would withdraw from DWP services:

We're working with one at the moment who's facing his second year of sanctions and for him the DWP and the jobcentre just does not work.... He sees it as some kind of place just to sanction him. So why would he go there to be abused? Why would he go there to be bullied? (Stakeholder from education and training focus group)

Respondents highlighted that a significant proportion of the young people they worked with felt degraded by their experiences with the DWP, being treated with little dignity.

Why would you continue to engage with a system that treats you so overtly badly and has all the power in that situation? You would just withdraw from it. (Stakeholder from alternative sources of support focus group)

The impact of changes to the benefit system was also highlighted, particularly the introduction of Universal Credit. As claimants are required to conduct and record extensive job search activity, much of it online, participants explained that those with low literacy, social anxiety or simply limited access to computers could be further discouraged from making a benefit claim.



The long wait to start a Universal Credit claim was also pinpointed as a demotivating factor. For some, the absence of basic personal paperwork such as birth certificates or passports or the lack of a bank account precluded access. However, the cost of obtaining such documents was often prohibitive.

Obviously to get on the DWP system, you need formal ID and a lot of them have not got it. (Stakeholder from alternative sources of support focus group)

Several stakeholders also spoke about the importance of peer and parental influence on a young person's decision whether or not to claim. They felt that many young people were discouraged from entering the benefits system by their friends and family.

I think the lack of awareness is part of it. It goes off of friends quite often. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

[T]he parents will be quite keen that they don't claim. They think they'll get used to it, and that in a way will take away the motivation to get work. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

Sometimes this was felt to be the result of a desire to protect those young people experiencing mental health conditions. It was felt that a common perception amongst parents was that the benefits system could work to exacerbate health conditions rather than providing support to their children:

The parents are quite happy to keep them and support them, there is also masses of mental health issues and the parents want to take, a lot of the time take that stress away from them. They don't want them to be involved in claiming benefits because they think that's going to make them more poorly as opposed to potentially getting additional support. (Stakeholder from employment opportunities focus group)

This situation could be compounded by a lack of knowledge among parents about the services available in the City. On the other hand, one worker commented that some young people saw little advantage in signing on when their parents or friends were willing to support them financially.

From their point of view, going to .... a mate and borrowing £20 for the week is way more worth it than navigating all these systems to get £47 a week. But then it's going to get stopped in two weeks anyway because they can't continue to manage those systems. (Stakeholder from alternative sources of support focus group)

It is notable that across all stakeholders consulted with as part of this project, there was very little awareness of the 'Youth Obligation' and how this might change and impact upon the Jobcentre Plus service offered to young people in the city. No stakeholders were aware of any additional resources available to support more intensive support.

One participant, whilst unaware of the policy, also reflected that the term 'Obligation' was likely to present barriers to engagement:

I think it's a choice of words as well though because the choice of words is, 'Obligation, expected to, expectations.' People feel they have to do it, so they choose not to, just not to because, 'If I do, if I engage with this, I'm going to be obligated to do this. I'm going to be expected to do that.' Straightaway, as a young person, it comes back to the same thing. It's just somebody else telling me what I've got to do (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group).

At the time of writing, even though the Youth Obligation should have come into effect, it is difficult to find information on what impact this has had on local Jobcentre Plus services.

## Alternative sources of financial support

With no income from work or benefits, stakeholders explained that being 'hidden' and 'NEET' could have a considerable negative impact on the individual concerned and the households in which they lived. Several commented that they knew young people who only ate one meal a day, others described families struggling to survive on a low income, exacerbated by 'non-dependent deductions' from benefits as a result of accommodating a young adult who was not claiming. In some cases, this led to the risk of eviction as rent arrears built up.

However, respondents in the focus groups echoed the young people's accounts regarding alternative sources of financial support in the absence of an income through employment or the benefits system. Attendees were agreed that many hidden young people were involved in marginal forms of employment, engaged in casual, episodic work, sometime through the so-called 'gig economy', other times through cash-in-hand arrangements with family, friends and neighbours for labouring, gardening or childcare. Car washes, window cleaning and dog walking were also identified as other popular sources of unofficial income.

People look after their mates' kids for £15 a day while a mate goes to work or whatever, so everyone's happy. (Stakeholder from alternative sources of support focus group)

As noted above, it was also felt that many hidden young people relied on the support of their parents for a place to live, a source of food and other basic amenities. For some, however, it was felt that their 'hidden' and 'NEET' status could be a symptom of family dysfunction, abuse or breakdown. Several respondents pointed to huge inequalities between those hidden young people with access to significant financial support (i.e. to cover the cost of travel, work clothes and course fees, etc.) and social networks and those whose background, resources and connections did not allow for this.



Several stakeholders also confirmed that involvement in crime was an option for some, with growing and selling cannabis a major element of this.

A high proportion of our young people are NEET and I would say they survive through their criminal activity. (Stakeholder from alternative sources of support focus group)

Several stakeholders felt that the more that young people disengaged with 'official sources' of income, the more crime and anti-social behaviour would occur in the city.

### 3.3 Supporting Hidden Young People – what works?

Focus group participants were asked to identify examples of 'good practice' relating to providing appropriate support for hidden young people. Several areas were identified referring to tailored support, extensive outreach, the particular skills and attributes of staff, and effective partnership working and targeting of services. These are outlined in more detail below. However, it is important to note that many also spoke about the challenges of reaching marginalised young people, particular in the context of austerity and cuts to local services.

### A tailored approach

Key to providing effective support for young people not in employment, education or training was felt to be a personalised approach, tailored around their individual needs and aspiration. The ability to sustain support over time and develop a trusting relationship was considered key here, particularly where young people had felt 'let down' by other services in the past:

For us what worked... Lots of one-on-one, lots of positive encouragement and feedback because in fact a lot of them, when they do come to you, if the system's letting them down or they feel they've been let down or adults - a lot of them feel that they've lied to them and let them down and they don't trust you and they think you're going to, as they would call it, 'peck head' (Stakeholder from education and training focus group)

The current Talent Match programme was cited as a productive model in this regard, which enabled support to be tailored to individual needs:

You say, "We're going to give you one-to-one support for two years at your pace which is based around you", so then some of our lads who are like doing gardening for the cash-in-hand, they can support them to be like how do we grow this into an actual business? How do we look at it in two years' time? (Stakeholder from alternative sources of support focus group)



Related to this, participants emphasised the importance of having staff with the right skills and personality to connect with hidden young people as a necessary condition for both bringing in and sustaining their engagement. Local, grassroots organisations who were known and trusted in local communities were considered key in this regard.

### Extensive outreach

Reflecting the key challenges of initial engagement, participants stressed the importance of significant and sustained outreach activities they had undertaken in their efforts to engage young people across the city:

[We do lots of] knocking on doors and trying to engage these young people, lots of flyers, lots of leafleting. Walking round, you know, the local area. (Stakeholder from education and training focus group)

One stakeholder from a local Jobcentre Plus service also described trying to engage local agencies to promote the support that they offered:

It's breaking down the barriers, isn't it? We take in people that you try and dispel the myths constantly. We have counsellors coming in. We have family workers coming into the Jobcentres to show them, so they can go back out and see what it is that we actually do. It's not a place that you might have thought it was. Everybody can think that certain things are awful or dreadful or it's your old perceptions or somebody's told you it's this, that and the other. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

Whilst in the majority of instances, this outreach work was conducted by local VCS organisations and had helped to engage young people in services outside of the mainstream benefits system, this approach had also led to more young people being aware of the opportunities available through Jobcentre Plus. One respondent, for example, highlighted how some young people had signed on after becoming aware that it could facilitate their access to local training opportunities (i.e. through Sector Based Work Academies).

However, several respondents reflected that their ability to reach young people was hampered by a lack of 'youth friendly' spaces (such as youth clubs) where young people could meet:

Unfortunately, we don't have a situation any more where people can go to essentially what used to be terms as a youth club. They don't have any of these facilities available to them. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

One Council officer revealed that they often identified 'hidden young people' once a household had built up significant rent arrears and as a result was facing eviction. This highlights the role of professionals outside of the 'youth sector' in identifying and linking this group to entitlements and support.

We get involved because they're about to be evicted. We're stopping the eviction and when we explain to them that you've got to contribute this because that non-dependent in your household is expected to contribute towards their rent now, but they don't have any income. (Stakeholder from conditional welfare focus group)

### Partnership working and improved targeting

Partnership working also emerged as key to effective engagement with hidden young people. In general, there was agreement across the stakeholders consulted that partnership working in Salford was fairly effective in reaching hidden young people, due largely to the good awareness of, and liaison with other relevant services. Some respondents felt that, despite significant cuts in funding, services were getting better at working together to understand the different pathways of young people across the city. For example, stakeholders talked about the development of effective data sharing agreements between education providers and support agencies. A representative from one local college, for example, explained that they were referring all those who dropped out of their provision to a local advice service. Some local housing providers were also working with local organisations to link young people to appropriate support. A representative from one social housing provider, for example, explained that where young adults were the named tenant, they were able to collect data on their employment and benefit status and use this information to target support via the phone calls, emails, or home visits.

### 3.4 Improving support for hidden young people

Participants were asked to reflect on how support for hidden young people could be improved. Their suggestions centred on six key areas: improving monitoring; making Jobcentre Plus more 'youth friendly'; opening up education and training opportunities to those not claiming benefits; funding tailored support; investing in more outreach; and improving careers advice and guidance. These are described in more detail below.

#### Improve monitoring

Among the individual proposals, participants recommended that the monitoring of 18 year olds should continue at a Greater Manchester level (despite the government's recent decision to relax requirements for local authorities to track 18 year olds) to ensure a consistent approach existed across the region. There was some suggestion that most, if not all, of the Greater Manchester authorities were already doing this. Having a consistent approach would mean the chances of post 18-year-old hidden young people slipping through the net would be reduced.



## Make Jobcentre Plus more ‘youth friendly’

It was argued by several respondents that Jobcentre Plus should review their approach to working with young people who access their service – with an emphasis on ‘support’ rather than control and sanctions. They argued that it was essential that information was available and support was appropriate. There was a general consensus across participants that supported more activities of this nature. Going to young people, rather than assuming/expecting they will come to you emerged as a general principle for effective services – both those offered by Jobcentre Plus and other youth organisations more generally.

## Open up education and training opportunities

Several participants noted that hidden young people could be denied access to local training opportunities as eligibility was contingent on them being in receipt of benefits (for example, Sector Based Work Academies). Participants argued the need for opportunities to remove nationally set eligibility criteria to enable Salford to pursue flexible approaches which focused on what local young people actually want and need.

It's about well, how can you open up that opportunity, so it gives you greater access to a range of people who are actually talented, but they just haven't had the opportunity to prove themselves. (Stakeholder from employment opportunities focus group)

Regarding education and training, several participants also identified a need for shorter courses, which could act as a ‘stepping stone’ into further learning opportunities. It was felt that longer, full-time intensive programmes were not necessarily attractive to young adults, particularly those who had been disengaged at school, college or who had not completed earlier training programmes. Furthermore, participants felt that many of the current training opportunities were unappealing to young people because they operated a classroom learning type format, when many preferred more vocational ‘hands on’ activities. Much of the current training provision focused on Maths, English and employability skills courses was felt to be unsuitable for significant numbers of young people who are NEET. This was partly due to negative experiences of schools, the rigid formula of learning and the lack of vocational content and work experience. Alternative forms of provision were considered key to opening up education and training opportunities to more young people in the city.

## Fund tailored support

There was a consensus that any support offer needed to be flexible, ongoing and tailored to the individual. Reflecting the ‘good practice’ described above, the value of flexibility of service and the importance of having sufficient time to allow young people to develop at their own pace, and the critical element of building trusted personal relationships was highlighted. As part of this, the value of venues where individuals could drop in as and when needed *‘and use a phone, type, get something typed up, borrow a bit of paper’* was also advocated.

Furthermore, several respondents emphasised the need for intensive but also, crucially, well targeted services. It was argued that sustained engagement was needed over a long period to prepare participants for a training or work opportunities. Focusing resources on a more limited number of young people to improve the chances of success was also felt to be more important than ensuring a high turnover of attendees on any given programme.

## Invest in more outreach

Several participants argued a need for more extensive outreach efforts across the range of existing support and services on offer:

There's people in all of the organisations round here that have got people but we need more and more of that and getting them out and about and finding them. (Stakeholder from education and training focus group)

Reflecting on the wider services ‘hidden young people’ were most likely to be accessing, participants felt that youth justice services, health services, housing providers, probation services, food banks and soup kitchens were potential points of contact. However, some reflected that some young people were reluctant to leave their homes and engage with any service.

Several participants therefore argued for a need for creative and flexible methods in attempting to engage with hidden young people; for example, via social media, and local/online radio stations. There was a general concern that the traditional engagement methods (leaflets, posters, etc.) may be ineffective and that social media (*‘via their Xbox, social media, Snapchat’*) may be more fruitful. One participant proposed that young people themselves should be supported to devise the marketing campaigns to reach out to those not engaging, as they would understand what would work.

Recognising the key role of parental influence on many hidden young people, several stakeholders suggested that more should be done to inform parents both about local employment, education and training opportunities, and about the support and services available through Jobcentre Plus and other local support agencies. One suggestion was to produce a guide for parents, which could be sent to the parents of all school leavers. Where parents were relying on young people for care, it was advocated that there should be an initiative to raise awareness among the parents of the impact on their child's career prospects, and what other support options could be available. Developing trust with parents in local communities was also seen as critical. Supporting local adults to become mentors as part of local youth services was presented as one idea for fostering a higher level of trust.

### **Improve careers advice and guidance**

There was a strong feeling that much better careers advice and guidance was needed, particularly for those young people who do not aim to go to University. For example, it was suggested that local education providers could develop relationships with agencies like Jobcentre Plus. It was also felt that local post-16 education providers should be working with schools more, to help to promote vocational pathways (such as apprenticeships) to pupils much earlier, and schools themselves needed to link to employers better (although the pressures on schools were recognised as was the reduction on careers advice). It was also argued that schools should identify those young people who were likely to fall short of the necessary core qualifications and ensure steps were in place to signpost them to appropriate options. Reflecting the broader support needs of many hidden young people (in particular relating to mental health and transport barriers to employment), stakeholders stressed the importance of ensuring that young people were able to access advice relating to these other issues, rather than just on participating in employment, education and training or accessing appropriate benefits.

As part of this, whilst there was some caution about having a standardised GM approach (as the local circumstances in Salford could be very different from those in Rochdale, for example) it was felt that overall better communication was needed at a GM level, especially to ensure young people and their parents were actually aware of local opportunities and what they involved – i.e. what an apprenticeship consists of.

## **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented key findings from focus groups conducted with a wide range of stakeholders working with young people across the city. In many respects, the views summarised here resonate with those expressed by young people with experience of being 'NEET' and 'hidden' presented in the previous chapter. Notably, several stakeholders similarly held negative perceptions of the Jobcentre Plus offer. However, others pointed out that it could be young people's perceptions rather than actual experiences of Jobcentre Plus services which created barriers to their disengagement. Efforts to break down these negative perceptions and better promote the support and services available were therefore emphasised. Furthermore, whilst largely absent from the responses of the young people we consulted with, the need to support 'hidden young people' with their mental health needs featured across these discussions.

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations



This report has presented new evidence concerning the experiences and views of a diverse range of hidden young people in Salford, and a range of stakeholders across the city who come into contact with and/or are aiming to support them. It has identified considerable gaps in the extent to which this issue is monitored, which inhibit an understanding of the true scale of young people who are both 'hidden' and 'NEET' in Salford. Whilst services across the city work together, there was a sense that a significant proportion of young people 'fall through the net', particularly as no agencies were statutorily required to monitor the issue in a consistent way.

Whilst we interviewed a diverse group of young people with different ambitions, abilities and circumstances, a number of common themes emerged from their accounts, and those of wider stakeholders consulted as part of this research. Limited awareness about the support young people are entitled to was widespread – both in terms of the benefits system and wider local opportunities. A lack of effective careers information, advice and guidance, alongside meaningful accountability measures offered by schools and post-16 education providers appears to have left many young people, particularly those who want to pursue vocational routes, without a clear pathway to opportunities in the city. Excluded from local employment and training opportunities and systems of support, 'hidden young

people' represent a significant financial and social cost – experienced by individuals and the households in which they live, but also the local community as their talents are not recognised and as some turn to crime in order to survive.

This report has uncovered a range of reasons why some young people who are not in employment, education or training do not claim the benefits that they are entitled to. Perceptions of Jobcentre Plus were generally very poor – amongst both young people themselves and a range of stakeholders across the city. With strict conditions and limited support deterring many young people from accessing the benefits system, it seems likely that the introduction of the Youth Obligation which emphasises greater conditionality for younger claimants is likely to increase the numbers of 'hidden young people'.

However, whether or not hidden young people need or want to draw on financial support from the social security system, particularly as they are able to access an income from other sources, not engaging with this system excludes them from mainstream support and service provision, as most programmes designed by policymakers to support young people are currently routed through Jobcentre Plus and other contracted services (including the Youth Obligation and broader initiatives such as Sector Based Work Academies). This underlines an urgent need for better customer

engagement on the part of Jobcentre Plus, but also, crucially, the need for services and support to be available to those young people who do not engage with the social security system. Programmes like Talent Match and other locally commissioned services which do not require young people to be signing on in order to access support are vital sources of support in this respect. The commitment from GMCA to ensure that hidden young people are able to access support and services is therefore both welcome and necessary.

#### 4.1 Recommendations for policy and practice

Developing policy and practice which effectively supports hidden young people is a complex and challenging undertaking. Policy levers to support hidden young people exist at a number of levels: local, sub-national (i.e. Greater Manchester) and national policymakers all have a role to play. Below several recommendations are made which cut across these different levels of governance.

##### 1. Count and recognise the issue

In order to ensure that an appropriate level of resources is devoted to supporting 'hidden young people', it is essential that policymakers commit to both recognising and counting the issue. This report contributes to a growing evidence base highlighting the gaps in monitoring the scale of non-take up amongst the young unemployed. Whilst difficulties in data collection should be recognised, without improving this picture, it is likely that the issue will be ignored. Furthermore, without systematic data collection, understanding the impact of interventions designed to support this group will prove difficult. We recommend that:

- National statistics should record the number of young people who are unemployed and not claiming benefits
- The GMCA continues to monitor the issue, updating and measuring progress in meeting its strategic commitment against the estimated number of hidden young people in the sub-region (currently 21,890) on an annual basis.
- We also echo Gaskell's (2018) recommendation that local authorities should track young people past the mandatory age of 18. Local authorities have a duty to support young people who are NEET up until the age of 20, tracking this group is arguably a necessary precursor to identifying young people in need of this support.

##### 2. Inform young people and their families about their rights to support through the benefit system

Ensuring that young people and their families are aware of their rights to support through the benefit system should form a key part of any attempt to better support 'hidden young people'. Ensuring advice and support is available for young people to access a system which is perceived to be complex is also important. We recommend that:

- Colleges and training providers should have a role in helping to improve signposting and referrals to support, particularly for learners who drop out of provision or complete programmes of study without a confirmed destination.
- Incorporating this information into the new 'Job Centres in Schools' initiative could also help to ensure that young people are fully informed, should they need to draw on the social security system for assistance after leaving school (the current offer focuses primarily on information and guidance on vocational pathways and employability skills).
- Tackling the 'stigma' of claiming benefits should be central to such activities. Whilst this can be tackled locally to some extent, national politicians and the media have a key role to play here.

##### 3. Review the adequacy of current provision for young unemployed people

It is essential that young people experiencing unemployment are able to access support to move into work and related education and training opportunities. Effective support for young people should be flexible, ongoing and tailored around individual need and aspiration. However, exactly what the current offer to young people through Jobcentre Plus looks like is difficult to pin down. That stakeholders had very little awareness of what the new 'Youth Obligation' would involve for young benefit claimants was concerning, particularly when they are charged with supporting young people to engage. We recommend that:

- Central government should lay out more clearly what the Youth Obligation involves, and should carefully consider appropriate levels of conditionality, recognising that many young people will disengage with a system focused on 'discipline' and little support.
- Working with local groups to ensure services are 'youth friendly' may also prove effective in engaging more young people with support.
- In Salford, we recommend the establishment of a working group between Jobcentre Plus and local youth organisations. This group should monitor the impact of the new Youth Obligation on young people in the city, and ensure the opportunities it provides for them are maximised. Here, learning should be drawn from the ongoing work of the GM Youth Panel and local Jobcentre Plus services.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://gmtalentmatch.org.uk/news/research-findings-now-available-jobcentre-plus-provisions-and-young-people-0> for more details.

#### 4. Ensure support is available to young people who do not claim benefits

In recognition of the fact that many young people will not claim, there is a need to ensure that access to support programmes are not wholly contingent upon a young person 'signing on'. For example, national initiatives (including Sector Based Work Academies and the Youth Obligation) and sub-national programmes (such as Working Well) only work with those who are claiming out-of-work benefits.

- National and sub-national policymakers should review policies and interventions which exclude young people not claiming benefits and explore ways of opening up opportunities and supporting hidden young people through commissioning which does not make support contingent on a benefit claim.
- In line with its commitment in the Greater Manchester strategy, GMCA should outline the steps it is taking to ensure effective support is provided to all hidden young people across the conurbation.

#### 5. Ensure young people and their families are aware of local support services

In addition to information about the benefits system, young people and their families also need to be aware of other local support services and opportunities.

- Providing information on all local support services and opportunities needs to be more accessible and continuously updated. The Talent Match Opportunities Hub is one example of a directory of opportunities which could be expanded for this purpose.
- There is a need to recognise that young people may need support in different areas of their lives – significantly relating to their mental health (whilst largely absent from the accounts of hidden young people included in this research, this has emerged as an important factor in wider research on the topic and from our discussions with local stakeholders). Ensuring local provision is sufficient to meet their needs and that such services are effectively promoted is important.

#### 6. Recognise the role of different organisations to engage young people through extensive outreach

Policymakers need to recognise the difficulties inherent in trying to find and engage with a group who are by definition 'hidden'. Supporting services which employ extensive outreach activities (rather than expecting young people to seek out and engage with them) is key. The role of a range of support providers beyond youth organisations which are likely to come into contact with hidden young people (such as housing providers, mental health services and family support services) should also be acknowledged and encouraged.

- Commissioners need to recognise the resources required for youth organisations to deploy such extensive outreach activities.

- Jobcentre Plus staff should also be supported to engage in more outreach work in community settings.
- Developing the capacity of professionals across a broad range of services to share/signpost to information about support and services available should be supported. Salford City Council should lead on this work in Salford.

#### 7. Support local community organisations

Reflecting the importance of 'word of mouth' in ensuring engagement, it is crucial that trusted local organisations which have localised knowledge and influence are supported to sustain and advance their work.

- Commissioning arrangements at both a local and sub-regional level should ensure that small grassroots organisations are able to benefit from any future programmes targeted at supporting hidden young people, ensuring that effective requirements are in place for larger providers to subcontract to smaller organisations.

It is notable that Salford's current commissioning arrangement for hidden young people is with one large provider.

- The Council should review this arrangement in light of the success rates in engaging 'hidden young people' demonstrated by different organisations (for example, as demonstrated through Talent Match programme performance data).
- Growing the capacity of the VCS so that its voice is heard and local organisations are able to better engage with key developments in the Combined Authority may also prove beneficial as activities to support hidden young people are developed.

#### 8. Encourage 'youth friendly' employment practices

Applying for jobs and hearing nothing back from employers can be incredibly disheartening. Particularly for those young people experiencing prolonged periods of unemployment, confidence and understanding about how to improve their applications is likely to erode.

- Employers should be encouraged to give feedback to all applicants. In Salford, this could be part of the City Mayor's Employment Charter. Whilst it is recognised that this will involve additional resource commitments on the part of employers, this could form part of their ambition to invest in the (potential) local workforce and be inclusive employers.
- More broadly, employers should be encouraged to ensure that their recruitment processes are as 'youth friendly' as possible – Business in the Community's 'Future Proof' campaign provides useful guidance here.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://futureproof.bitc.org.uk/>



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