

COVID-19 and employment changes in Wales

Insights for policy – young people, employment and health

Qualitative research findings

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This work was commissioned by the Wider Determinants of Health Unit of Public Health Wales. For more information contact PHW.Determinants@wales.nhs.uk

Thank you to the many young people, professionals and organisations for your time and insight

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1. Executive summary and conclusions

Introduction

Public Health Wales commissioned Beaufort Research to explore views on employment challenges faced by young people (with and without dependent children) related to the pandemic; and what could be done to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 related employment changes on young people. Qualitative research was carried out with 18-24 year olds in a range of different circumstances (six focus groups), third sector organisations that supported young people (one online workshop), and a range of policy decision-makers and influencers in this area (17 individual interviews). Fieldwork took place 20 January to 16 March 2021.

Unlike quantitative surveys, qualitative investigation is not, by its nature, designed to be statistically representative. It is intended to be illustrative and to allow for in-depth exploration of the diversity around the topics of interest.

Key findings

Young people's experiences: Mental wellbeing and struggles to find or keep work among challenges facing young people

Exacerbation of pre-pandemic challenges

Prior to the pandemic, **precarious working conditions** was an issue for some young people. Regarding opportunities for fair work, it was widely believed among decision-makers, influencers and third sector organisations that young people were more likely be in precarious jobs. This vulnerability had **intensified** with the pandemic.

There was the potential for employers to be under **less commercial pressure to adopt fair work practices** because of larger candidate pools. Opportunities were limited and competition for any kind of job was now fierce.

Some young people in this study would settle for **any kind of employment** although arrangements like fixed hours were preferable to zero-hours contracts. Additionally, it was stated that there was a rising number of young people eligible to claim **Universal Credit** who were not claiming it, for example because of periodic unemployment.

Some young people were struggling to find work before the pandemic emerged, for example being unable to commit to specific hours because of childcare issues. The way in which **rural areas** had been hit was a concern on occasion for some third sector organisations and decision-makers and reflected in some young people's experiences.

Some decision-makers, influencers and third sector organisations remarked how the pandemic was expected to have **widened existing inequalities among young people and with older generations**.

New challenges due to the pandemic

Young people often found their situations arising from the pandemic **stressful**, hard, boring, difficult, uncertain and lonely with little obvious support other than family and friends.

Motivations to study and engage sometimes suffered. Those who were **unemployed or on furlough were most likely to mention mental health** challenges although increased pressure from employers to work more hours or different shifts could still be an issue.

Third sector organisations, decision-makers and influencers were often concerned about how the impact of the pandemic was affecting **mental health and wellbeing**. Third sector organisations were worried that the pandemic was going to **halt or reverse the progress** they had made with vulnerable young people and employers.

Longer term concerns were regularly voiced as well. While headline unemployment figures might begin to decrease, the **scarring effect** of this period remained to be seen.

Young people's **pathways to employment** had also been disrupted. **Vocational** learning challenges were sometimes singled out as adversely affecting young people's employment opportunities, while some in higher education were struggling to stay motivated and did not feel supported.

A common problem for young people with dependent children was access to **childcare** and disruption to their support networks.

Good, fair work

Most young people who were in stable employment generally felt **well supported** by their employer. Young people on occasion commented that changes to their employment circumstances, while challenging, had acted as a **catalyst to follow an ambition** (e.g. retrain). Reference was made among third sector organisations to an increasing interest in **entrepreneurship** among young people.

However, the pandemic, **combined with the potential effects of Brexit**, could result in a 'perfect storm' adversely impacting on workers' rights and standards, particularly for young people.

Current interventions: Formal interventions sometimes thought to be making a difference among decision makers and influencers - but limitations noted and little awareness of support among young people

Support was not top of mind for most young people participating in this study. There was low awareness of any support channels. Those who had used external support reported mixed experiences.

Some decision-makers and influencers commented that it was **too early** to be able to properly evaluate current interventions. In addition, the furlough scheme was expected to be hiding a good deal of unemployment.

Some believed that previous and current interventions highlighted that **giving more disadvantaged young people work experience**, apprenticeships, placements or jobs were effective policies. The UK Government's **Kickstart scheme**¹ regularly featured in discussions as a current intervention that was making a difference for young people with employment experience and opportunities. However it was sometimes criticised for its limited reach and bureaucracy.

¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-kickstart-scheme-opens-to-youth-in-wales>

Some decision-makers mentioned **Communities for Work**² and, occasionally, **Communities for Work Plus**³ as helping people, including young people, to develop employability skills. Some third sector organisations had heard positive experiences from young people on Communities for Work as well. Also highlighted as effective on occasion were other interventions developed by the Department for Work and Pensions to support young people (e.g. young people's work coaches).

Furlough was highlighted as a successful financial intervention. However, the security of those jobs in the longer term was largely unknown. **Universal Credit** was useful for those who claimed it.

Very few **health and wellbeing focused interventions** related to employment were raised. There was also very limited reference to current approaches aimed at helping young people access **fair work**, and to supporting young people with **dependent children**.

Partnership working was deemed essential by some decision-makers and influencers for general employment challenges as well as for young people. Positive examples given included Regional Skills Partnerships⁴ and Employment Response Groups.

Beyond Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Denmark and Quebec were highlighted as adopting approaches that helped support young people (e.g. Scotland's Developing the Young Workforce⁵, and encouraging stronger relationships between government and civil society organisations).

Changes to benefit young people: A guaranteed offer a widely suggested way forward

Some decision-makers and influencers advised that there would be more to be gained from expanding **existing interventions** that had the potential to make a real difference rather than attempting to begin from scratch.

Participants often stressed that a key way of improving employment prospects for young people, in the shorter and longer term, was a **guaranteed offer** of some description. It could involve the continuation or expansion of existing interventions. **Structured pathways** for young people into employment would also be essential, some advised. Some 18-24 year olds also felt that they would benefit from **better and more sustained careers advice and support** including once they had left education.

There were recommendations that the **public sector itself** could do more to attract younger people into its workforce as part of efforts to tackle the issue.

Decision-makers and influencers regularly believed that it was essential to focus interventions on young people **most likely to be hardest hit** by the pandemic and recession. **More time in education** was also suggested for this cohort, either temporarily to catch up, or via greater investment in the further education (FE) sector.

Additionally, more could be done, thought some participants, to support disadvantaged young people with better **digital connectivity**.

² See <https://workingwales.gov.wales/how-we-can-help/learning-new-skills/communities-for-work>

³ See <https://workingwales.gov.wales/how-we-can-help/learning-new-skills/communities-for-work-plus>

⁴ See <https://businesswales.gov.wales/skillsgateway/skills-development/regional-skills-partnerships>

⁵ See <https://www.dyw.scot/>

Some decision-makers and influencers suggested that the outcomes for young people could be improved by developing a **greater focus on 'green jobs' and adapting to changes within sectors**, such as retail's move to more online and digital offerings. It was advised that this would require investment in supporting **reskilling** funds and in supporting young people to consider these alternative career aspirations. Developing **transferable skills** would be essential. Effective, sustained **mentoring and coaching** would be important to support young people during transitions into work or different sectors.

Tackling **infrastructure barriers** would benefit young people, some believed, such as public transport availability and affordable housing.

More **partnership working and stronger collaboration** between organisations was expected to help support young people more effectively, for example when developing policy and between business and local authorities.

Accessing fair work

Some stressed the importance of ensuring **the voice of young people** was part of the process of co-producing solutions. **Raising the minimum wage** was also put forward as a key change required for fair work. Some young people complained of issues working variable hours and wanted **more certainty** with their working arrangements.

Some participants also advised that any business in receipt of Welsh Government funding or incentives for work or employability schemes should be required to **meet certain fair work conditions**.

In some cases, decision-makers and influencers felt that it was a more of case of **doing what was right for the young person**, and that expecting good fair work for all, in all situations, might not be very pragmatic in the shorter term. Some young people were desperate to secure any kind of work.

Some young parents thought **better, low cost or free childcare provision** would make a great difference to their employment opportunities.

Research questions and knowledge gaps: Decision-makers / influencers' information needs are broad-ranging but mental health, Wales based data and hearing from young people all feature

From time to time, decision-makers and influencers commented that there was already sufficient **existing evidence and learning** from recent recessions, policy interventions and emerging data that could be used to help inform policy in this area.

Areas of interest included the following:

- The impact of employment changes on young people's **mental health and wellbeing** in Wales. Examples of perceived gaps included the long term scarring effects, and more qualitative insight from practitioners and young people; (*decision-makers and influencers*)
- Identifying **focused information needs on which to act**. It would be valuable to take an **intersectional approach** to the challenges for young people in Wales: which individual characteristics were most likely to place young people at risk; (*decision-makers and influencers*)

- More **robust Wales-level and sometimes regional-level data** on young people and the impact of unemployment; (*decision-makers and influencers*)
- **How to reach the most disadvantaged** and disengaged young people; (*decision-makers*)
- How the labour market would look for **young people in the future** and the impact any changes might have on their life chances. Government strategies would need to be available well in advance and sufficiently detailed so that the necessary **training and skills** development programmes could be put in place. It was also important to understand to what extent there was **pent-up demand** in certain sectors of the labour market; (*mainly influencers*)
- The impact of employment challenges on **dependents of young people**; (*decision-makers and influencers*)
- **What young people say they want or need** regarding work opportunities and to help them join or re-join the labour market. (*Decision-makers and influencers*)

Conclusions

Young people were generally **unaware of any support** that could help them look beyond the sectors they would expect to employ them or help them with their concerns about their employment prospects. This reinforces the need to develop and promote the support available.

A common strand through this work is the impact of employment changes on young people's **mental health and wellbeing**: as a challenge faced and an area where decision-makers and influencers want a better understanding of the situation in Wales. Some young people in this study who were on furlough, in education or training had no obvious sources of support - they were uncertain of what opportunities lay ahead. Diminishing motivation levels that some reported could impact on future life chances as education, training and development opportunities are consequently affected.

Those employed could still face pressurised work and family environments. Efforts to provide advice, experience and skills development would need to ensure that mental health and wellbeing were considered, with prominent support on developing resilience.

A further theme among decision-makers, influencers and third sector organisations is the need to **hear more directly from young people and practitioners** who work with them, to provide qualitative insight in areas of interest and to help inform policy. This would mean not necessarily relying on the usual lines of communication with existing forums and so on but exploring ways to engage with those who were seldom heard.

A **guaranteed offer** of work experience, apprenticeships, training, or jobs emerged as a key suggestion for better supporting young people. Efforts should be made to expand or enhance what is known to work and existing interventions, some felt. Additionally, a focus on those who had most to gain and were more disadvantaged would likely see greatest benefit. Widening inequalities among young people was a key concern.

Exploring how young people can benefit from a **green recovery** and other sectors was often recommended although it was pointed out that opportunities would still be limited and that the sectors that traditionally employed young people were still likely to provide more jobs.

A clearer picture of the situation in **Wales** (and at a regional level for some) versus the UK was sometimes called for and would facilitate better decision-making.

Fair work tended not to be associated with current interventions and support and young people did not give the impression of being aware of their rights or feeling empowered to speak up in this respect. It was deemed important and, it was thought, could be supported through various suggestions such as raising the minimum wage, building young people into plans for a green recovery and into the public sector workforce; and placing further conditions on businesses in receipt of government incentives and support. It would be key to ensure that young people genuinely benefited from employer interventions versus more experienced individuals; and that additional roles were created rather than acting as replacements for existing staff.

2. Situation and background to the work

The COVID-19 pandemic and control measures have had an immense impact on the economy and employment. The number of employments furloughed in Wales was 125,000 at 30 November 2020 and this increased to 158,700 employments furloughed at 31 December⁶. The figure rose further to 183,400 employments furloughed at 31 January 2021. Provisional estimates then show a slight reduction to 175,200 at 28 February.

There has been a large decrease in employment for people aged 16 to 24 years over the last year. In ONS's March 2021 employment statistics for the UK, the employment rate for those aged 16 to 24 years decreased by 4.7 percentage points on the year, to 50.8%⁷. This compared with the rate for those aged 35 to 49 years decreasing by 0.7 percentage points on the year, to 84.9%.

The accommodation and food services sector have been especially hard hit by the impact of the pandemic. Currently, over half (52 per cent) of workers in their early 20s in the UK work in these sectors, up from 44 per cent among those born a decade earlier⁸. Young people (aged 18-24) and those from Wales' most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups have been most affected by business closures.

Young children, and those yet to be born, are considered particularly at risk from economic downturns as, at this point in the lifecycle, physical and cognitive trajectories are being set, and unemployment early in an individual's working life can have long-term scarring effects⁹.

Although mixed, evidence shows recessions and economic downturns impact on several health outcomes, particularly those relating to the prevalence of common mental health conditions, substance use and suicide. The evidence for the impact of unemployment on health is particularly strong. It is therefore likely that without sufficient intervention, the COVID-19 related economic downturn, compounded by likely adverse impacts of Brexit, will affect not only the health and wellbeing of the current generation, but also subsequent generations with a real possibility of widening health inequalities.

Public Health Wales commissioned this study to inform its work with agencies in Wales in order to mitigate the adverse effects of COVID-19 related employment changes on health and health equity of current and future generations in Wales.

⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-february-2021/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-february-2021>

⁷ See

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/employmentintheuk/latest>

⁸ See <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/11/From-locking-down-to-levelling-up.pdf>

⁹ See <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14799>

3. Research objectives and method

3.1 Research objectives

This overall aim of this work was to elicit population insights from organisations which support young people, young people aged 18-24 years (with and without dependent children) and policy influencers and decision-makers on the COVID-19 related employment changes. The key topic areas covered across the target audiences were:

- Exploring the experiences of young people since the pandemic started with a focus on employment changes and prospects, the challenges faced, and any impact on family health and wellbeing;
- Eliciting perceptions of current interventions and support aimed at helping young people with employment changes and prospects;
- Capturing views on what changes would support young people in the future with opportunities for work, including good, fair work.

In addition, decision-makers and influencers were also asked to identify research questions they would like answered or knowledge gaps filled.

3.2 Research method and sample

The research used a qualitative approach because of the nature of the objectives. It consisted of a mix of an online workshop, online focus groups, and in-depth, individual interviews carried out either online or by phone. The benefits to this project of a qualitative method were:

- The ability to explore the diversity around the topics of interest in more depth than would be possible via a quantitative approach;
- The ability to reach groups of interest who would otherwise be difficult to include using a quantitative method;
- The opportunity to explore with participants their suggestions for what the future should look like for young people regarding employment opportunities.

The potential drawback of this qualitative approach was the limited ability to draw decisive inferences from the feedback obtained that can be applied to a population, as the sample would not, by design, be representative. However, qualitative investigation is intended to provide in-depth understanding which was required for exploring the research objectives. Its strengths lie in the ability to identify themes across diverse groups, provide illustrative examples of experiences and opinions and indicate the convergence or divergence of views or reported experiences.

A systematic approach was taken to identify participants at all stages; third sector workshop, focus groups of young people and interviews with policy influencers and policy makers.

It sometimes proved challenging to reach potential participants in third sector organisations. This might have been because of the impact of the pandemic and containment measures on maintaining a service under such conditions. More generally, it was also apparent that it was a very busy time for some potential participants, particularly among decision-makers and influencers. The method, sample achieved and recruitment approaches used are outlined below. Fieldwork took place 20 January to 16 March 2021.

Third sector organisations were identified who had a significant role in supporting young people in Wales, through review of the charities registered with the Charity Commission and discussion of umbrella charity organisations in Wales. UK wide bodies were assessed regarding their offering in Wales and some organisations exclusive to Wales were included. Three categories were agreed upon:

- Agencies with a specific focus on supporting young people into employment;
- Agencies which provide a broader range of support to young people for example through sports and theatrical activity but also offer support with employment and skills;
- Agencies providing support (including employment) to particular groups of young people such as those from minority ethnic backgrounds and younger disabled people.

This part of the research consisted of a two-hour online workshop with **16 third sector organisations** taking part. The session involved breakout groups so that participants would have more opportunity to talk in depth about the topics of interest. Public Health Wales developed a shortlist of organisations to approach. This included organisations that would be well placed to identify potential participant organisations. Beaufort then contacted the organisations to explain the project and gauge interest levels - engagement levels were high.

Organisations that took part were: Adoption UK Wales; Barnardo's Cymru; British Red Cross; Business in the Community Cymru; Careers Wales; Carmarthenshire Carers; Catch 22; Creating Enterprise; Elite Supported Employment Agency Ltd; Inspire 2 Work; People & Work; Shaw Trust (Big Ideas Wales); STEM Cymru; We Mind The Gap; Youth Cymru; and Youth Sport Trust.

Young people aged 18-24: six online focus groups were convened with a mix of women and men aged 18-24 years old, with 33 participants in total. The discussions lasted up to one hour. The composition of the groups was as follows:

- Two groups with young people with at least one dependent child at home. They included a mix of circumstances such as employed (precarious and not so precarious work¹⁰), unemployed, and in training or education;
- One group with young people who were employed or self-employed and not in precarious work or furloughed, with no dependent children at home;

¹⁰ At the recruitment stage, participants were given a range of statements related to precarious types of work and asked which if any applied to them. See Benach et al (2016) for discussion of definitions for precarious employment. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, Volume 45, Issue 1, February 2016, Pages 232–238, <https://academic.oup.com/ije/article/45/1/232/2363833>

- One group with young people who were in training or education including a mix of vocational and higher education settings, with no dependent children at home;
- One group with young people in precarious work or on furlough, with no dependent children at home;
- One group with young people who were unemployed and seeking work, with no dependent children at home.

The sample included nine Welsh speakers and five participants with ethnic minority backgrounds. Participants were recruited mostly via Beaufort's network of qualitative recruiters across Wales. A small number of participants were also recruited with the kind help of a third sector organisation. The regions in Wales covered by the focus groups were: Cardiff, Flintshire / Denbighshire, Ceredigion, Gwynedd, Merthyr Tydfil, Pembrokeshire, and Torfaen. The sample therefore covered rural communities, coastal regions, Valleys areas and cities across Wales.

Policy decision makers and influencers were identified at a national level (Welsh Government officials, UK Government, Future Generations Commissioner's Office, academia (Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data), Trades Union Congress, Confederation of British Industry, Bevan Foundation), regional (City Deal¹¹), local (Local Authority, Local Health Board) and international (Scottish Government). At a local level, local authority councillors, and a senior official, in decision making positions were included from across the main political parties in Wales. Local authority representation included Carmarthenshire and Monmouthshire as well as from the Welsh Local Government Association.

A limiting factor in terms of recruiting all of the targeted participants was time and resources. This was particularly challenging given that field work was carried out at a typically difficult time of year, during the pandemic while still in full lockdown, over the festive period and in the run-up to an election period in Wales.

A project board with members from Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association and Public Health Wales (local and national teams) informed and reviewed the approach to identifying participants.

3.3 Discussion guide, analysis and reporting

For each research audience, Beaufort drafted a topic guide to use in the discussions which was finalised with Public Health Wales. Each guide was based closely on the topic areas described in 3.1.

An inductive approach to the analysis was used whereby the researchers categorised the data to develop themes that emerged from the content of the focus groups and interviews. The categories and themes were broadly framed within the key research objectives and topic areas.

¹¹ See <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld11264/cr-ld11264-e.pdf>

Bold text is used in the report to identify themes and change of topic. Anonymous verbatim comments made by participants are included in the report. These comments should not be interpreted as defining the views of all. Instead they give insight into individual views on the points identified. Each comment has an attribution which indicates the participant's characteristics.

This report is not intended to be an evaluation of interventions or initiatives. Its aim is to give qualitative insight into perceptions of the different research audiences regarding youth employment changes and challenges in Wales because of the pandemic. It is possible that participants' perceptions may not necessarily reflect reality or be entirely accurate.

Public Health Wales and Beaufort Research would very much like to thank all participants who gave up their valuable time to contribute to this work.

4. Young people's experiences regarding employment and pathways to employment since the pandemic began

4.1 The impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health and wellbeing

4.2 The impact on young people and pathways to employment

4.3 Impact of employment challenges on young people's dependent children

4.4 Recognition of the impact of the pandemic on sectors employing large numbers of young people

4.5 Widening inequality

4.6 Challenges finding or retaining good, fair work

4.7 Impact of employment challenges on using the Welsh language

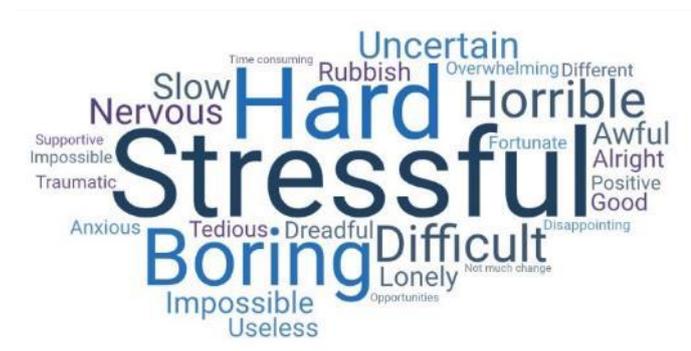
4. Young people's experiences regarding employment and pathways to employment since the pandemic began

This section primarily focuses on the challenges young people have faced regarding employment, education and training since the pandemic started, according to young people, third sector organisations, decision-makers and influencers. It also covers any reported impacts on the health and wellbeing of dependent children. More positive experiences and outcomes regarding employment, training and education are also covered. The first two parts to this chapter are broadly divided by challenges that were more likely to be new and challenges that were more likely to already exist and had intensified because of the pandemic. It is recognised that for some young people, issues in the section described as more likely to be new may have already existed for them.

Challenges young people faced that were more likely to be new

4.1 The impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health and wellbeing

Words used by young people in this study to sum up their experiences regarding work or finding work, training or education since the pandemic began were predominantly negative. The most common words were 'stressful', 'boring' and 'hard' (see figure below). They sometimes used words such as 'overwhelming', 'impossible', 'horrible' and 'traumatic'. Some described their feelings during the time with words such as 'anxious', 'nervous' and 'lonely'. Some who had more neutral or positive experiences during the pandemic tended to mention that they had seen little change or that they felt fortunate because they had not been affected.



Impossible with the lack of education and the lack of training around here where I live. There are not many jobs, all there is are food factories or steel work factories so there aren't many jobs really, so it's pretty much impossible. (Male, 18-24, dependent children)

I'd probably say boring, personally. That's how I'd describe it, just because there's not much excitement in doing things online. (Female, 18-24, in education)

The latest lockdown was generally considered by young people to be harder to endure than the first lockdown that started in March 2020. Because of the time of year and the weather, it wasn't possible to be outside as much or to meet friends outside (when allowed). Many young people said they found it **hard to motivate themselves** and described themselves as bored and spending too much time on their PlayStation or Xbox (generally men) or watching TV. Some male participants commented they missed team sports and socialising with friends after games. Female participants also missed their social networks

but were more likely to mention FaceTime or Zoom sessions or phoning family and friends. Both genders sometimes remarked it was harder to stay fit and motivated with gyms closed.

I'm used to playing football and then socialising after. Just seeing friends on a normal basis, it's just ridiculous at the moment. It's like all work no play. Round and round. (Male, 18-24, secure employment)

I don't really do much, I just go on walks every day. Apart from that, I'm mostly in bed watching telly. There's nothing to do really. We can't go out now, you can't go meet friends, you can't really do anything apart from with the people in your household – and most people live with their mum and dads. So, you can't really do anything. (Female, 18-24, on furlough)

Those on furlough generally missed being in work because of the structure it gave their day, the ability to socialise, the financial security and the sense of achievement and satisfaction. Some were already struggling financially as furlough payments had reduced or as they faced the prospect of furlough ending. Moreover, some were very anxious about their prospects of returning to work and their long-term financial position. Those who were **unemployed or on furlough were most likely to mention mental health** challenges – many of these participants talked about stress, frustration, insomnia, anxiety, feeling unmotivated and constant worry about money.

I would say it badly affects my mental health. You can definitely notice it with the lack of variety in your life. Every day is the same isn't it, it's been the same for a long time now? (Male, 18-24, unemployed)

It is making me more anxious, and I don't know what's going to happen with work. I know I'm not going to have a job after this so it's making me worry a bit. It gets you thinking when you've got nothing to do as well. (Female, 18-24, on furlough)

Some young people **did not feel able to access any support** with their mental health and wellbeing during lockdown. They were sometimes unsure where to go or were reluctant to approach their GP when they suspected they would not get a personal appointment. As with online learning, some were more comfortable with face-to-face interactions. Also, some young parents felt they needed a break from their children and wanted adult company. A few spoke of the pressure of being together in the same house all day, especially if not working.

Generally with the whole coronavirus I'd say my mental health has got a little bit worse than what it was originally. I suffer with anxiety and depression. Now, I've had more time on my hands and I've been speaking to other people online, I've noticed that I think I've got other mental health issues as well, which has obviously made me worry a little bit more. I'm needing to get in touch with the doctor but I'm worried that the doctors won't speak to me, because I know they're not doing any appointments or anything. So then I worry, if I ring the doctors they're only going to say we can't do appointments, we'll just speak to you over the phone. An over the

phone appointment is not very good, I'm not good on the phone. I just don't like speaking to people on the phone generally. (Female, 18-24, dependent child)

While those in **secure employment** tended to be less likely to mention any major adverse impact on their health and wellbeing, certain working situations did affect participants' mental health.

One 18-24 year old worked at a local supermarket in the online shopping department, which had seen a boom since the pandemic started. While he was glad to have a permanent, secure job (after losing his previous job in lockdown) he found the variable shift patterns he now worked were putting strain on his home life, his relationship with his partner and his health. His shifts changed from day to day - sometimes starting at 2am, while on other days they could start at 4pm - and he worked weekends. It was therefore difficult to find a routine and this was impacting on him in several ways – he was missing meals, had no energy and was eating unhealthily and snacking on junk food. He also found he was tired and irritable with his partner and felt he was missing out on quality time with his baby son. While he was grateful to have a secure full-time job (it had started out as part-time and a temporary contract) and the supermarket was not 'a bad employer', he wanted to work either 9am-5pm or to have shift patterns that were fixed for a week at a time. He also commented that the store was understaffed so workers were picking up other people's work and that this created further pressure.

Some weeks I'm fine and the other weeks, yeah, I'm exhausted and we have more arguments about things, naturally, and I've turned to like energy drinks and stuff like just to keep fuel in my body. Because if you imagine when I've had my Thursday day off, with me having a full night's sleep the day before that, I'm not ready to go to bed until 10 o'clock, but if I don't fall asleep until 10 o'clock and I'm getting up at 1am in the morning, I'm just running on fumes. (Male, 18-24, dependent child)

Those in stable employment were sometimes also suffering from a degree of **loneliness and boredom**. They missed their social networks and friends. Moreover, some found aspects of working from home challenging, for example switching off at the end of the working day, learning a new job (harder remotely) or sometimes just getting answers to queries.

Those who had started at university during the pandemic often talked about feeling slightly isolated and being unable to make new friends. They were sometimes stressed and down about the whole situation, which was completely different to the university experience they had been looking forward to. It was also difficult for some not being able to see their family, if living away from home in lockdown – they missed their parents and siblings. One participant described how housemates had come to blows spending so much time together.

Third sector organisations who were working directly with young people often raised the concern of how the impact of the pandemic on employment opportunities for young people was affecting mental health and wellbeing. Decision-makers and influencers emphasised the issue as well. The lack of opportunities, working in insecure roles, education and career pathway disruption and uncertainty, remote learning and working, in-work poverty, managing debt, stigma associated with benefits, expectations from employers to work from

home with young children to look after, how unemployment is perceived by society and limited access to mental health services were given as examples of factors affecting young people. Those working but living with parents faced further anxiety with concerns over passing on COVID-19 to others at home.

The young people I've spoken to, they're stuck at home, in their beds, it's affected their mental health in a way that they can't go out and mix with anyone, and that's going to affect their skills, social skills in the future. Some young people have been out of work for a few months now, maybe getting into a rut or it's affecting their confidence and so on. I can see that it will be more difficult for them to get back into work. (Third sector)

The particular thing that we're seeing is emotional and mental health. Even if you take the proxy indicator of youth and demand on healthcare services then we know from our children and adolescent mental health services, there's a real increase, and in the adult population as well. (Influencer)

The longer they were not working, the harder it was expected to be for them to get into work as mental health and interpersonal skills suffered. One decision-maker reported a rise in self-harm and attempted suicide in their region among young people. Also, data reportedly showed that young people were more at risk of **in-work poverty** which was important for health and mental health.

Longer term concerns were regularly voiced as well. While headline unemployment figures might begin to decrease, the **scarring effect** of this period, particularly on young people, remained to be seen. There was occasional reference to the need to learn from the work of David Blanchflower and David Bell on youth unemployment and its well-recognised long-term scarring effect¹².

People who were already disadvantaged seem to have been hit. I think one of the things that we've identified, and we're talking to ministers particularly around the youth side of it, something the ministers are very, very interested in [is] the long-term scarring effects. Again there is evidence to suggest from previous recessions that the impact on young people can outlast the initial impact. So where headline rates in terms of unemployment might start to drop, the effects on young people can be much longer lasting. We're concerned about that. (Decision-maker)

4.2 The impact on young people and pathways to employment

Participants who were in education or training sometimes had issues with **online learning** and found the lack of face-to-face tuition stressful and difficult to cope with. Some mentioned practical problems such as access to the right software and high-spec PCs for technical courses. Further education (FE) learners sometimes felt there was no understanding with the volume of assignments they were given to do online. These

¹² Blanchflower, D. and Bell, D. 2011. *Young People and the Great Recession*; see <http://ftp.iza.org/dp5674.pdf>

experiences could leave young people feeling overwhelmed and anxious about falling behind their peers.

You can't see what people are doing, you only see what they're handing in, their grades, and you think, am I missing something? I'm awful with technology as it is, so that doesn't really help. People have good laptops, good working space and things like that. And I don't have a working laptop, so, it's little things that make it a bit more difficult, and I feel like it stands out more when you're only seeing these people on your screens. You don't get to see their faces or interact with them. It feels more competitive. (Female, 18-24, in education)

A lack of support from universities was raised on occasion by young people. There was a contrast, however, between different universities: some participants received regular communications and felt well-supported, while others had less contact and felt they were just left to get on with it, having to seek support from their own networks.

Issues were also raised among third sector organisations, decision-makers and influencers regarding the pandemic's impact on young people's **pathways to employment**. These were regarding accessing placements and apprenticeships, equipment, the number of lessons being learned and the impact of the pandemic on learning continuing to be unevenly felt¹³. There was also concern voiced about the impact of disrupted education on 15-17 year olds living in lower income households in particular, and the damage that may have been done to their employment opportunities.

That has been a big impact on those furthest away, most disadvantaged young people, they can't complete their training because of lockdown scenarios. That's been a huge issue. Work placement opportunities have been a huge issue for training providers which is hindering their take-up into employment. (Third sector)

Vocational learning challenges were sometimes singled out across the research participants as adversely affecting young people's employment opportunities, with stalled apprenticeships and disruption and delay to practical assessment processes. Those affected were frustrated and anxious about what would happen next. It was difficult to learn without face-to-face support.

There was the risk that employers could lose confidence in the cohort of young people attaining vocational qualifications who had not been able to adequately demonstrate the quality of their learning and skills. Even so, it was anticipated by one decision-maker that sufficient research would take place on this subject. A perceived reduction in funding for foundational economy¹⁴ FE skills and training prior to the pandemic was believed by another decision-maker to be now making it even harder for some more disadvantaged young people to climb the career ladder.

¹³ See <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Learning-in-Lockdown.pdf>

¹⁴ See <https://gov.wales/foundational-economy>

An unemployed young father in North West Wales was unable to progress his vocational training because the local FE college was closed. He found himself at a loose end during the pandemic - before the pandemic he had been volunteering regularly, but volunteering opportunities had also dried up as the site had shut. Another participant in his late teens was taking an apprenticeship in stone masonry but described himself as being 'at a standstill', because the college was closed and assessments had stopped.

I think for people like me who are in a trade and trying to learn, there's not really – you can't do trade work online, I can't take a stone and start putting it in a wall online. So there's no assessors to come out to see me. At the minute, I'm at a standstill. I'm not getting any qualifications, nothing. No colleges are open. (Male, in education)

It was pointed out by one participant that the data showed more young people **staying on in education** during the pandemic. The concern was that this might prove problematic when this cohort left education if there was an inadequate supply of jobs.

Although there's been this big drop in employment amongst young people, quite a lot of those have responded to that by staying on in education. The number not in employment, education, or training has gone up a bit, but not massively. So, I think we may be storing up problems more for later in the year. (Influencer)

4.3 Impact of employment challenges on young people's dependent children

A common problem for young people with dependent children in this study was **childcare** and disruption to their normal routine because of coronavirus. Normal family support networks could often not be used during the pandemic, meaning that parents sometimes had to adapt their working patterns. Most were not in well-paid jobs and could not afford private nursery provision for their children, so they had to manage as best they could. If they were self-employed or employed through agencies, they received no pay if they were unable to work, so parents' household income often reduced. This was not just a problem as far as routine childcare was concerned but also when unexpected situations arose such as children being ill and the whole family needing to self-isolate.

My partner, . . . he's self-employed [as a landscape gardener] so he's cutting his wage for me to go and work. He only goes to work once a week in order to look after the little one. (Female, 18-24, dependent child)

As illustrated in 4.2, impacts on childcare were sometimes affecting young parents' ability to provide a **stable family life**. Parents' working hours were disrupted, for example having to move from working regular hours on week days at a supermarket to night shifts including weekends because of the increase in business. Parents were rarely together as a family unit.

A young female care worker in West Wales found her employer wanted her to work more hours during the pandemic but was struggling with childcare for her son, who was in nursery school. His grandmother normally looked after him around nursery hours, but this was no longer possible when the coronavirus hit because **his grandmother was vulnerable and they did not want to risk her catching it**. The part-time school hours were difficult to manage without family support so she had to take her son out of nursery. She and her partner took it in turns to stay off work and look after him, meaning that their household income was reduced - she was only paid for the hours she worked and her partner was self-employed.

I've pulled him out of the school because of COVID. We're struggling to find childcare for him now, because me and my partner both work full-time, one of us has to stay off work to look after our little one. . . . My mum would pick [son] up after school, at 12, and she'd meet me somewhere at 6pm when I finished work. It was really easy but since COVID, it's been difficult. My mum is high risk as well. I go to work with someone who is high risk and my mum is high risk, so you can't mix. (Female, 18-24, dependent child)

Policies aimed at controlling the pandemic, like **school closures and homeworking**, were expected or known among third sector organisations, decision-makers and influencers to particularly affect parents and single parents with young children. Also, the fact that single parents were no longer exempt from job seeking was occasionally deemed likely to add to the challenges of the parent and potentially affecting the child. In addition, there could be unrealistic expectations from some employers regarding how effectively a young parent could work from home while looking after dependent children. The impact on dependent children of being largely confined at home, and with parents experiencing substantial pressure, was expected to have implications for children's as well parents' mental health and wellbeing.

Third sector organisations were concerned that young parents were **not able to access formal and informal support networks** during lockdown which led to their 'prospects being diminished'. Family members who would normally help out with childcare could no longer do so because of containment measures. In addition, an organisation referred to situations where parents who were key workers moved out of the home to protect vulnerable children which meant older siblings who might be in education, training or looking for work became the main carers.

I've got a teenager whose mum's a nurse. Mum now lives in a little flat, and then the teenager is in charge of the sibling who's in primary, who is autistic. (Third sector)

Dependent children of parents in a slightly older age group of 25-49 were believed to be more at risk than 18-24 year olds because of **rising personal debt**, according to one influencer and their organisation's work. Parents in this older age bracket were reportedly falling behind on bills and borrowing so that even if they did get (back) into work, it might not be sufficient to retain standards of living.

Overall, decision-makers and influencers assumed that this was an important area but tended **not to be very familiar** with any detail on the subject. There was, however,

recognition that issues around skills, training and employment became harder to remediate the older an individual became; so a preventive approach and giving children the best start in life was an optimal approach.

Challenges more likely to exist pre-pandemic

4.4 Recognition of the impact of the pandemic on sectors employing large numbers of young people

Many of the sectors that young people in this study were targeting for work had been particularly **hard hit during the pandemic**, such as retail, hair and beauty, gyms, and hospitality. Some young people commented that they had always faced challenges finding work (not enough qualifications, not experienced enough, unable to be flexible because of childcare) but that the pandemic had **intensified the challenges**.

Even before the pandemic I found it very difficult to find work. I think that's because they want people that are experienced and when I was looking for work, because I was 16 when I had [my daughter], . . . they were looking for somebody who wasn't going to be a parent, wasn't pregnant. They were looking for people who were more flexible about what they can do. (Female, 18-24, dependent child)



There was widespread recognition among third sector organisations and decision-makers and influencers of the continuing challenge for young people who worked, had worked or would have looked to work, in **sectors disproportionately hit by the pandemic**. It was anticipated among these participants that, in business hierarchies, employed young people were more likely to be less financially secure and among the first to be made redundant. Even with the

shoots of recovery hoped for with the vaccination roll-out, there was concern voiced on occasion that retail for example might not see much of return to physical shopper interactions affecting the availability of roles for young people. Instead, the high street could see retail spaces being repurposed or closed completely.

They're usually on short-term contracts, they may not be eligible for furlough, they might not have been with an employer long enough. We find as well that their hours are fluctuating, in that they are being asked to cover staff sickness. (Third sector)

There was believed by one decision-maker to be significant work being carried out to understand these sector issues at a broad level, by organisations such as the Resolution Foundation¹⁵, New Economics Foundation¹⁶, and the Learning and Work Institute¹⁷ among

¹⁵ See <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/>

¹⁶ See <https://neweconomics.org/>

¹⁷ See <https://learningandwork.org.uk/>

others. Regular analyses were reportedly also available from the Institute for Fiscal Studies¹⁸ on a UK basis, broken down by nation. However, it was emphasised that data on the impact of these circumstances on young people's mental health and wellbeing did not appear to be available.

The employment market has collapsed for lots of young people. You hear less so now than you did in the first lockdown, but incidences of 300 or more people applying for a bar job. The hospitality and catering industry, which employs, . . . you know, it's decimated retail. . . . What we don't have is people looking at the mental health and wellbeing of individuals in these categories. (Decision-maker)

Changes within these sectors that reportedly affected young people were already afoot prior to the coronavirus and had been accelerated by the pandemic, commented some decision-makers and influencers. These included the increase in automation and online services, the growth in the gig economy and working from home. In addition, based on recent proprietary data, an influencer explained how they were seeing increasing numbers of young people leaving Wales to work in England because of perceived better opportunities. This apparent trend had begun prior to the pandemic.

The more that we talk to younger workers, the more frustrated they are becoming. I also worry . . . that we were seeing already when we were due to leave the European Union that more younger workers were looking at leaving Wales, or for those that had left Wales to study, or to enter into looking at apprenticeship programmes and opportunities, they were leaving and going to England. . . . It's getting worse by the day. (Influencer)

There were examples in this study where young people had experienced **major impacts** to their employment because of the pandemic.

A 21 year old father of a young baby working for a waste management company in North Wales received a call from his workplace on his way to work during lockdown to say they were letting him go because business had dried up. As he was employed through an agency he was not entitled to any paid notice or redundancy payment. He had no savings to fall back on and his partner was at home with the baby, so for a month or so (until he managed to find another job) he had to borrow money from his grandparents and 'max the credit card' to provide for his family.

Another participant in the South Wales Valleys had been working in a private nursery, was initially furloughed but then lost her job as the nursery was looking after fewer children and therefore needed fewer staff. Since then, she had been working as a community care worker but was not getting as many shifts as she needed to provide herself with a reasonable income. She was a qualified teaching assistant but was unable to find work in a school during the pandemic.

¹⁸ See <https://www.ifs.org.uk/>

A further point made regarding opportunity for young people was that when the economy goes into recession, **firms stop recruiting**. It made it particularly difficult for young people entering the labour market because they tended to go into new jobs or apprenticeships. The challenge was therefore not only about the sectors that had been badly hit by the pandemic, but also about the lack of opening up of opportunities for young people in the labour market.

[Apprenticeships are] one of the first programmes to stop at times of trouble. So, I think that's a challenge because there's been some really good progress made there [pre-pandemic]. (Third sector)

The way in which **rural areas** had been hit was reflected by the experiences of some young people in this study. Those living in rural areas commented how little work there was in their local area while those in the South Wales Valleys talked about their town centres having been in decline for a long time. It was also a particular concern on occasion for some regional decision-makers and third sector organisations, given the reliance in some regions on tourism, leisure, and hospitality. Another key rural sector, agriculture, was not anticipated to be very appealing as an alternative for young people with low pay and sometimes the hours worked.

The only places that are open here are banks, supermarkets, and then everyone else works in farms. They get jobs from their family and stuff so they're OK. (Female, 18-24, unemployed, rural area)

The rural community need to make some of those traditional jobs worth pursuing. So the pay to work on farms and to pursue agriculture is so minimal, . . . all that just does not work. (Decision-maker)

Linked to this, **public transport** issues in more rural areas had existed pre-pandemic and continued to limit employment opportunities according to some young people, decision-makers and third sector organisations. Having to run a car because of limited or non-existent public transport options incurred significant extra expense. It also had the potential to make jobs financially unattractive. Additionally, some young people were thought to be increasingly reliant on their parents and family members to drive them to and from the workplace, especially as driving lessons and tests had regularly been suspended during containment measures. There were also concerns voiced about the reliability of services, with drivers missing work because of coronavirus or having to self-isolate; and about catching COVID-19 on public transport.

Transport's a little bit of an issue [in this area of the Valleys]. They've changed the bus times and the buses are now a little bit longer apart and they're only allowing so many people on each bus. If you miss a bus then, if your interview is at two o'clock and the bus is at half past one and you miss that bus, then you've missed your interview. (Female, 18-24, dependent child)

4.4.1 A reduction in income

Young people in this study who were currently furloughed had mixed experiences. While a few felt well supported by their employers and were confident that they would have jobs to return to, many did not receive much, if any, support and were unsure about their future. Examples were given of having bosses seemingly avoiding contact when the young person wanted to find out the latest situation. Most seemed to receive the Government furlough payment, with no contribution from their employer, which caused financial problems as their pay reduced each month. Some struggled to keep their heads above water on their reduced income, and having to borrow money from friends and family to get by was sometimes embarrassing. For others, the impact was less severe, meaning they had less disposable income and had abandoned regular savings.

A single mother in her early 20s living in North West Wales had temporarily given up her job as a healthcare assistant at a local hospital because she was concerned about the risk of catching the virus at work and passing it to her young child and other vulnerable family members. Her employer allowed her to take unpaid leave, but her income was affected while she was not in work. She received Universal Credit but still relied on support from her mother with meals and necessities for her child.

Another participant currently furloughed from her job as a bar worker at a caravan park in North Wales was struggling financially, as her furlough pay was steadily reducing each month and her employer did not top it up.

My first furlough payment was quite a high one, but now with my last furlough pay it is really low. It's taken about four hundred pounds off me, and it's properly affected me seeing my payslip today, and seeing that going down. I didn't know what to do. I broke down in tears over money, because every month I've been getting my furlough pay, but it's coming to an end. I'm so skint, I've got no money, nothing. I've got to feed myself and my partner, we've got to fend for ourselves here. It's so hard, it's actually really upsetting. That's the biggest impact on me – the amount of money that's been dropped from my furlough. (Female, 18-24, on furlough)

Additionally, many of the participants in full-time education had lost regular part-time work which had proved valuable in giving them an income while studying. There were limited opportunities to find new part-time jobs in the pandemic, with sectors such as retail and hospitality badly affected, and fierce competition for the few remaining opportunities. In more rural locations, including for young people in education who had returned home, examples were described of there being very few employers which made it virtually impossible to find part-time work. The situation was a cause for anxiety because there was no end in sight on which to focus.

I live in such a small town anyway . . . and in lockdown, we have two supermarkets that are open, so that's all that's open to us. So it's been difficult finding something else. (Female, 18-24, in education)

It was stated among decision-makers and influencers that 18-24 year olds were more likely to have moved back in with families to help with financial challenges. It was acknowledged

that this was not without its issues given its impact on developing independence and the potential impact on access to benefits. The lengthening of what was described as the **youth phase**¹⁹ - the extension of youth transitions to independence - in the UK where young people were falling back on family for much longer, was thought to have been accelerated by the pandemic. One decision-maker referred to anecdotal feedback of parents then adversely affecting young people's opportunities, for example not allowing them to take up or return to university places because of coronavirus concerns.

Echoing these views, young people in this study living at home with parents were less likely to be lonely or to be suffering financially but they described other challenges, such as losing their independence and freedom. Some felt they had reverted to being a child.

4.4.2 More positive experiences among young people

Young people on occasion commented that changes to their employment circumstances, while challenging, had acted as a **catalyst to follow an ambition**. A single parent in South East Wales found her employer planned to close the high street travel agency branch in which she worked, around the time she was due to return from maternity leave. It spurred her on to pursue her ambition to take up an Open University course, while at the same time growing an online business.

For a few others, the pandemic had opened up new opportunities. A participant was in the middle of his level 3 access to healthcare training with the intention of going to university when COVID-19 broke, so left education and started work in a health role he had been keen to try. The pandemic had meant there were plenty shifts available at times that suited him. Another worked as a telecoms engineer and had seen demand for broadband rise rapidly which had benefitted business.

4.5 Widening inequality

Some decision-makers, influencers and third sector organisations remarked how the pandemic was also expected to have widened existing **inequalities among young people and also with older generations**. From a training and education perspective, the gap between non-deprived and deprived young people was expected by some to widen even more because of the pandemic, as younger generations completed their full-time education with varying levels of engagement and connectivity. The example was given of issues with access to work experience where young people from more privileged backgrounds might have had the connections to be able to secure that experience in some way during the pandemic. The result could be greater disengagement in training and education among those already furthest from the labour market. Furthermore, young people with a graduate qualification for example might have been more able to work from home whereas non-



¹⁹ See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13676260500431628>

graduates could have been in more insecure roles when the coronavirus emerged and not necessarily able to work from home or do so productively.

The point was also made that there was reportedly an increasing shift of wealth and opportunity from **younger to older generations** that was difficult for young people to arrest. It had existed prior to COVID-19 but was believed to have been amplified and accelerated by the pandemic. Also, it was stated that there was a rising number of young people eligible to claim Universal Credit who were not claiming it, for example because of periodic unemployment. The sanctions on Universal Credit were described as 'extremely hard, extremely onerous', with 'a lot of hoops to jump through if you're unemployed for two or three weeks'. Young people would instead rely on family for support or civil society organisations where they could, said one influencer. Young people in this study regularly identified family as their main source of support.

Increasing **competition for entry level jobs from older people with employment experience** was thought to be compounding the challenges faced by young people looking to enter the labour market.

Some also emphasised that other, potentially interlocking characteristics were important to bear in mind with this topic, such as additional **already disadvantaged groups** including women, disabled people and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Third sector organisations were often concerned that the pandemic was going to **halt or reverse the progress** they had made with vulnerable young people and employers. Young carers, for example, who were already vulnerable were becoming increasingly isolated because it was harder for them to access support or respite from their caring duties. These vulnerable young people had relied on face-to-face interaction and support from third sector youth workers that was no longer possible. Similar concerns were also raised about the vulnerability of care leavers²⁰ and access to support.

Care leavers, they usually are over-represented within the NEET²¹ group, a lot of them live alone. What we find for our young people is that self-motivation is incredibly difficult. They have probably struggled historically through education so trying then to engage virtually is really difficult. On top of that, you've got the isolation of living alone. They are the young people that don't have that support network that they need for their wellbeing. They might be reliant on professionals who are working core hours and are restricted on being able to do those face-to-face visits. (Third sector)

Young carers and care-leavers, for example, who were already vulnerable were becoming increasingly isolated because it was harder for them to access support or respite from their caring duties. These vulnerable young people had relied on face-to-face interaction and support from third sector youth workers that was no longer possible.

²⁰ See <https://law.gov.wales/publicservices/social-care/Local-authority-responsibilities/responsibilities-children/leaving-care/?lang=en#/publicservices/social-care/Local-authority-responsibilities/responsibilities-children/leaving-care/?tab=overview&lang=en>

²¹ See <https://gov.wales/young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet>

The **lack of connectivity or suitable devices** was sometimes highlighted as a barrier to employment for some more deprived young people and contributing to widening inequalities. They were unable to apply for jobs or amend their CVs on their smartphones. In addition, poor broadband connection could be a problem for young people in more rural areas. Attempting to provide such support online was extremely difficult.

I've come across some young people who are unable to do things, maybe for other reasons – unable to do a CV, unable to look for jobs online because they don't have a laptop. There are some young people without email – some of them have very poor IT skills too – can't create an email account. Before the pandemic, I would have asked them to come into the office, helped them to open an email account, you know, step-by-step in that way. (Third sector)

Housing issues were mentioned on occasion among decision-makers, influencers and third sector organisations as contributing to overall widening inequalities affecting young people as well. There were difficulties paying rent when, for example, a young person was on the minimum wage and furloughed. It could also be difficult for young people to find rental accommodation in larger cities owing to cost and needing home owner guarantors. Accommodation and transport challenges excluded them from accessing jobs, summed up some third sector organisations. Furthermore, initiatives to support people regarding eviction notice periods were reported by one influencer as coming to an end in Wales²². Another housing related issue highlighted was how the removal of bridge tolls into Wales had reportedly seen an influx of house buyers into South East Wales with its more affordable options than England. This development was felt to be contributing to young people being priced out of house purchasing in the region.

Illustrating the issue, a few young people in this study had experienced **housing issues** during the pandemic. Most others were still living with parents or had returned to live with parents while in full-time higher education. A small number with dependent children had experienced delays in moving into a new home because of the impact of the pandemic on its construction.

An unemployed young father, his partner and young children had waited almost a year after leaving their privately rented home to be able to move into their new social housing property. They had moved in with his parents and lived out of boxes while they waited for their new home to be completed. Another participant and her partner were buying privately but their completion date was moved back eight months because of the pandemic, meaning that the family were cooped up in a small flat with no garden for an extended period. Another single parent was already living in a crowded home with other family members and found it sometimes challenging.

²² See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2021/377/made>) and <https://business.senedd.wales/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?Id=27569>

Further challenges young people faced

4.6 Challenges finding or retaining good, fair work²³

It was widely stated by decision-makers, influencers and third sector organisations that several types of employment in which young people often worked through lack of choice were more likely to create precarity: work that is poorly paid, unprotected, and insecure. A number of issues were highlighted affecting young people's ability to access good, fair work. There was the potential for employers to be under **less commercial pressure to adopt fair work practices** such as higher wages because they had a larger pool of candidates to draw on for jobs. Much of the employment within the sectors employing young people was considered fairly precarious, insecure and often low paid already. Furthermore, it was pointed out that young people often would not have the assertiveness to challenge inappropriate working practices. So would the pandemic simply accelerate precarity for young people further?

That's going to weaken the labour market position and the bargaining power, if you like, of those individuals still further. So will that almost lead to a kind of race to the bottom in terms of employment standards and practices within sectors? I guess that's our broad concern. (Decision-maker)

What we see with the employers, . . . is young people are exploited. . . . There's no responsibility of employers to [invest] in their personal progression. They just see young people as a cheap commodity that they can bring in and they can get out, and they're saving money because minimum wage for somebody who's sixteen, seventeen, is really low. (Third sector)

The argument that **any job is better than no job** (see 6.9) was seen as a damaging short-term fix by some third sector organisations. In one example, a third sector organisation had been working with a young person who had been enrolled on an engineering apprenticeship before being made redundant at the start of the pandemic. When looking for new employment, the young person had been told there were no engineering jobs available locally and so they were encouraged to work at a local retail outlet. This had a reportedly devastating impact on the individual's mental health and wellbeing – they had become a different person.



²³ Good, fair work can be defined as working conditions which support health and wellbeing through:

- Sufficient pay
- Security (in other words not precarious work)
- Hazards controlled (i.e. health and safety)
- Appropriate psycho-social environment (e.g. support from colleagues and managers, inclusive culture that welcomes feedback, environment that allows for social interaction)
- Family / personal life balance
- Worker rights

In another example of this challenge, if starting a job during the pandemic, it would have been more difficult to feel **adequately supported in their new role if largely working remotely**. There would not be the same level of induction, training or social interaction that would support good work under normal circumstances and help with career progression.

I started this job actually in lockdown. So, for me, I had to learn everything online over a computer. It's obviously going to take me a lot longer than it would in the office and somebody's next to you, showing you everything. (Female, 18-24, employed)

The pandemic, **combined with the potential effects of Brexit**, could result in a 'perfect storm' adversely impacting on workers' rights and standards, particularly for young people, concluded one decision-maker. Given the challenges, employers might not be inclined to go beyond the minimum of what was required of them.

There was, however, occasional acknowledgement that employment conditions like zero-hours contracts might provide a desired **flexibility** for some workers. Another influencer remarked that they were unaware of any specific adverse developments in this area because of the pandemic that did not already exist: 'a bad employer is a bad employer whether we're in a pandemic or not'.

Young people in the study who were unemployed, on furlough (and not confident of returning to a job) and those in education who had lost part-time work were often concerned with finding **any kind of employment**. As discussed above, they reported encountering very limited opportunities, experiencing intense competition for vacancies and being disheartened by the lack of response from employers.

One single parent in the South Wales Valleys had applied for well over 50 posts and had only had one interview. She had heard nothing back from most of the applications which had gone to employers such as retailers.

I've been looking now for maybe three, four months almost. I've had one interview out of all the jobs that I've applied for. I re-applied for certain jobs and I re-sent [my CV] and I've still not got anything back. Some of the shops don't even email you back to say that you haven't been successful. They just leave you hanging and then you're like, are they going to get back to you or not? (Female, 18-24, dependent child)

While good, fair work was not a top-of-mind concern for most participants looking for work, a few young people mentioned the scarcity of secure jobs. There was occasionally criticism of jobs on offer for their pay, hours and the type of contracts (often zero hours). A small number of single parents commented they needed a job that offered at least 16 hours a week to be worth doing but there were very few of those around.

Additionally, those working in the **health and social care and retail sectors** appeared sometimes to be less well-supported than those in other sectors. Some mentioned pressure from employers to pick up more hours or take more shifts. Others mentioned a lack of

understanding of their family situations and losing pay when their shifts were cut because of caring responsibilities. One hospital worker also referred to the lack of support in her workplace.

Frustration was evident among some young people in this study with current contracts and employment terms and conditions – some were on zero-hour contracts but were not getting enough shifts; others wanted fixed hours so they knew what hours they would be working and how much they would be earning. It would also help with organising childcare arrangements.

But in times when I want to be working, because I'm on a zero-hour contract as well with work, so even when you can work, they still don't give you shifts sometimes. It's quite frustrating and annoying, a bit shit. (Male, 18-24, employed)

I'm still on a zero-hour contract, which I've been on for about four years now. I've actually asked them for an hourly contract, which I am entitled to. But they keep refusing. (Female, 18-24, dependent child)

4.6.1 Examples of good employers

Some young people in this study were in stable employment and generally felt **well supported** by their employer (e.g. in the public sector and financial services). The changes they had experienced were often switching to home working or adopting different working practices, for example wearing PPE in work, rather than anything that affected their income or prospects. These changes were still difficult to come to terms with at times.

Examples of how good, fair work could look during the pandemic were: being given homeworking equipment; wellbeing support (for example being allowed a 'wellbeing hour' during the day to get out for a walk or some exercise, making it clear who to turn to for support if needed); being allowed the flexibility to choose whether they worked from home, in the office or a combination of the two; having regular video catch-ups with colleagues, especially if furloughed, but also valued by those working from home; being allowed to take paid leave from face-to-face work because of concerns around vulnerable family members; and having regular contact with managers in furlough which kept them in the loop and provided a source of support if needed.

I was actually pretty lucky as I kept my normal income but at the start for the first five months, they gave me permission not to attend work because my mum is asthmatic. Luckily they still paid me then, they didn't cut my pay, they let me work from home. (Female, 18-24, secure employment)

4.6.2 Young people's views on future prospects

Those in stable employment were mostly confident about their futures, especially as some had seen an increase in demand for their employer's services during the pandemic. A few were worried about their own prospects post-pandemic or had changed their plans. One in the health sector was concerned his work would dry up. Another in the broadcasting sector had decided it was too risky to leave his job and go freelance. Concerns were also voiced by some of those currently on furlough.

Some in education felt that the pandemic would definitely **affect their prospects** of finding a good job when they graduated. They anticipated fewer quality jobs would be on offer. One participant had struggled to find work after graduating last summer because companies were not hiring as many graduates as usual, so chose to stay in higher education and take an MSc. A few unemployed graduates said they were considering going back into education because it felt like a 'safe option'. At the same time, they worried that more people might choose to do the same, meaning that their job prospects on leaving would be no better.

Some who were unemployed and looking for work had already **changed their plans** or diversified because of the pandemic and the difficulty of finding work in sectors that they were targeting. A few had set up small online businesses selling clothes on sites such as Depop²⁴ and there were references to others they knew setting up businesses and becoming more entrepreneurial.

Some of my friends have done online courses and they're trying to start up their own businesses as eyelash technicians and stuff like that. So they're moving away from the hospitality bit and becoming like entrepreneurs. (Female, 18-24, unemployed)

4.7 Impact of employment challenges on using the Welsh language

Welsh speakers in this study, for the most part, reported that their use of the Welsh language had not altered as a result of any COVID related employment, education or training changes. In one case a Welsh speaking undergraduate had been looking forward to joining the Welsh Society at her English university, but because of COVID this had not happened, which made her feel isolated. Conversely, another participant described how his use of Welsh had increased during the pandemic, as he was now spending more time at home with his Welsh speaking wife and two young children.

²⁴ See <https://www.depop.com/>

5. Current interventions and their perceived effectiveness

- 5.1 Work experience and opportunity
- 5.2 Increasing young people's employability
- 5.3 Employer engagement
- 5.4 Financial support
- 5.5 Health and wellbeing focused interventions related to employment
- 5.6 Partnership working
- 5.7 Accessing good, fair work
- 5.8 Interventions in other countries
- 5.9 Supporting young people with dependent children

5. Current interventions and their perceived effectiveness

This chapter highlights national and local interventions, and occasionally international initiatives that participants associated with supporting young people during the pandemic in relation to employment and pathways to employment.

Some participants, more so among decision-makers, commented that it was **too early** to be able to properly evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions to support young people with employment changes and prospects during the pandemic. In addition, furlough was expected to be hiding a good deal of unemployment. The mass unemployment expected in a recession of this scale might only arise **once furlough came to an end**, some advised.

In six months' time, we'll be in a far better place to say [an intervention] is having a real impact in reducing the number of young people out of work in Wales. If furlough ends, or when it ends, . . . Well, none of us know, the impact of it, to be quite honest. (Decision-maker)

The argument was also made that it could be **very difficult to effectively measure** the impact of a policy or intervention because of limited opportunities to do so and the challenges presented by running randomised control trials. Even where case control trials (based on observation) might be possible, it was still deemed difficult to compare like with like, explained one decision-maker.

Support was not top of mind for most young people participating in this study. Very few formal sources of support were mentioned as having been used and there was low awareness of any support channels. Most young people said they relied on **family or friends** for support whenever they needed it. This tended to relate to financial and wellbeing support. None of those on furlough or in precarious work had accessed any formal help or support with training, employment or careers and said that they would not really know where to obtain help.

5.1 Work experience and opportunity

Some believed that previous and current interventions highlighted that **giving more disadvantaged young people work experience**, placements or jobs were effective policies and, according to one decision-maker, could be more important than full-time skills development. Jobs Growth Wales²⁵, Go Wales²⁶, traineeships, and incentivised apprenticeships were given as examples of effective Wales-based interventions which were periodically evaluated and thought to make a difference. Control groups were used for evaluations so that the scale of the benefit was recognised, said a decision-maker.

We've got a very good apprenticeship offer anyway and I'm very proud of that and the way we've done that, both in general and modern apprenticeships as well, with graduates. So we've been very careful with that, the way we work with developers

²⁵ See <https://careerswales.gov.wales/getting-a-job/jobs-growth-wales>

²⁶ See <https://www.gowales.co.uk/>

and industry. . . . We run that modern apprenticeship every year and looking to increase that in real terms as a part of our recovery response to COVID. (Decision-maker)

The UK Government's **Kickstart scheme**²⁷ regularly featured in discussions as a current intervention that supported young people with employment experience and opportunities. Although early in its implementation in Wales, one decision-maker expected there to be 'a lot of young people flowing onto Kickstart as the year progressed. In addition, a large number of employers across a range of sectors in Wales were reportedly already involved, including some with whom the DWP would not normally have interacted. This was leading to new relationships and an increase in the number of staff working on the scheme. The potential longer term impact was the maturing relationships with employers, provided that they were able to reach the kinds of candidate they required in this way. It would also be key to ensure that the scheme's potential lay in creating additional opportunities rather than replacing existing jobs. Another decision-maker, in addition to being a gateway for businesses to access Kickstart, had created roles within their own organisation to be part of the scheme.

I would say, from an employer interest, and wanting to take part, and bidding for Kickstart opportunities, we've had great interest in Wales. . . . If those employers see that the relationships are effective and providing good quality candidates for them, hopefully that will help us be in a better place. (Decision-maker)

While deemed a good idea in principle, a view was expressed on occasion that the Kickstart scheme so far **had not reached the anticipated numbers of young people**, reportedly due in part to its launch coinciding with further containment measures. There had also been anecdotal feedback that the scheme was not very easy for employers to navigate when applying, with one decision-maker describing it as a 'bureaucratic nightmare' to set up for a local authority as a gateway for local businesses; and for businesses applying as well. It had, for example, taken several months to set up vacancies even though the local authority would have been ready to take on young people from much earlier on. The delay was seen as valuable time lost for some young people who would have benefitted. Effective implementation was expected to continue to be limited while restrictions were in place. It was deemed a difficult task to develop longer term interventions when there was so much uncertainty about how and when Wales would emerge from containment measures.

Further perceived issues highlighted with Kickstart by a couple of influencers were that it was not on a large enough scale, did not last long enough, had limited quality control, did not appear to be fully benefitting young people furthest from the employment, and reflected a 'work first'²⁸ policy orientation rather than taking a more holistic approach to young people's needs which in the longer term could be more beneficial to the individual. In

²⁷ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-kickstart-scheme-opens-to-youth-in-wales>

²⁸ Work first requires the immediate placement of welfare recipients in employment irrespective of their educational level or skills. Work first proponents believe that by compelling welfare recipients to engage in steady employment, they will acquire desirable habits and a work ethic. Educational qualifications and job skills can be acquired after they are placed into regular jobs. Midgley, J. 2008. *Welfare Reform in the United States: Implications for British Social Policy*; see <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6524832.pdf>

addition, the eligibility requirement to be receiving Universal Credit was at odds with apparent trends of young people being less likely to claim the benefit even though they were eligible.

At a regional level, a positive example was given of supporting young people on a pathway to employment in the **health sector**. It involved public and private sector organisations providing an ‘apprenticeship academy’ for health. It was believed to be making a difference and a useful way forward given current economic uncertainties.

There are still a host of roles in health that you can bring apprentices into. [There’s] an apprenticeship academy in healthcare, which is led by Education and Cardiff Council, there’s a whole series of public sector and private organisations right across Cardiff that have signed up to that. (Influencer)

On occasion, however, decision-makers and influencers referred to the **uncertainty around how long containment measures would last**, meaning that some interventions aimed at helping young people into work could not be so effective until there was more clarity on when measures would ease. It was thought harder for some employers to commit in this way, for example with the Apprenticeship Recruitment Fund from the Welsh Government²⁹, and some were more likely to be preoccupied with keeping the business going rather than taking on trainees or apprenticeships despite the incentives.

Reference was made among third sector organisations to an increasing interest in **entrepreneurship** among young people, observed at first-hand, via Big Ideas Wales³⁰. More accessible online support, combined with the need to find work, were reportedly leading to a broader range of young people looking to start their own business. This view was reflected among young people in the study with a couple of examples of participants running their own business to help make ends meet, such as selling clothes online.

We’ve seen a really substantial increase in young people accessing our services and support who are driven by necessity. And interestingly, moving to a digital offer we’re seeing greater engagement from young people because they can anonymise themselves. They don’t have to walk into a room, they don’t have to show themselves on a screen, they don’t have to speak. They can type in the chat or they can just listen and take that information away. So we’re seeing a rise in positive engagement. (Third sector)

In a final example, a third sector organisation in North Wales described how an initiative was supporting young women into work by employing them directly as part of the training scheme. They were therefore in receipt of a wage while training to move on to other work. They benefited by leaving with qualifications, a reference, experience and a wage. Work placements, coaching and mentoring sessions, activity days and experiences were also available.

²⁹ See <https://businesswales.gov.wales/skillsgateway/skills-and-training-programmes/apprenticeships/funding-available>

³⁰ See <https://businesswales.gov.wales/bigideas/>

5.2 Increasing young people's employability

Some decision-makers and third sector organisations pointed to existing interventions aimed at helping people, including young people, to develop skills and qualifications to improve their chances of gaining employment. Some singled out the perceived effectiveness of **Communities for Work**³¹ in this respect. It aimed to increase the employability of individuals who are not in employment, education or training and who face complex barriers to employment. The service was described as tailored and responsive to people's needs. Mentors and advisors could draw down training support for the programme participants. It might initially be on confidence building, or other specific skills. Then the main emphasis was reportedly on vocational training, typically up to level 2, helping 16-24 year olds and those aged 25 or older into work or on the pathway to work. As part of the programme, efforts were reportedly being made to explore what more could be done to incentivise employers to recruit young apprentices and create more traineeships.



It had been found that at the peak of the epidemic, the programme had still been able to reach some of the 'hardest-to-help' groups into work because of the growing demand for logistics employees. Anecdotally, there were instances of those supported by the service writing to thank staff for this support. Evaluating the overall impact, however, was complex because individuals could earn money and remain on Universal Credit, for example. Even so, several thousand young people had reportedly been supported into employment via the intervention since its creation in 2015. Young people were believed to be easier to engage with than older people and engagement targets had been exceeded with 16-24 year olds.

I've seen [Communities for Work] grow and develop and support so many people from really poor backgrounds, making a massive difference and it's not just to the customer. It's to their family as well. . . . We know that regular interventions with work coaches and customers, young people, is effective. (Decision-maker)

Some third sector organisations had heard positive experiences from young people on Communities for Work, for example helping them with CVs, job applications, confidence and jobs.

I receive quite positive feedback – helping them to make job applications and so on. And sometimes they refer them back to me, if a young person, for example has overcome one barrier, that they've developed confidence and that they're ready now to go on to college etc. (Third sector)

³¹ See <https://workingwales.gov.wales/how-we-can-help/learning-new-skills/communities-for-work>

The Welsh Government funded programme **Communities for Work Plus**³² was given as a further programme that supported young people and others into employment or employment pathways. Its aim was to help those who might be left behind because they were not eligible for Communities for Work support. It was described as using the same model as Communities for Work, but also included engagement officers to encourage 'harder to reach' groups to participate. Employer liaison officers worked with local employers to act as a bridge to identify marked gaps in the market. According to one decision-maker, funding from the scheme had more or less doubled as part of the Welsh Government's COVID commitment plan which had proved very helpful, for example employing more mentors, employer liaison support and achieving better reach through digital investment. Demand for the service had reportedly increased in recent months compared with the same time last year.

Also highlighted as effective on occasion were other interventions developed by the DWP to support young people. They included the **Youth Offer Wales** (a 13-week intensive period of support with a work coach), **young people's work coaches**, and establishing **Youth Hubs** alongside other organisations, for example with digital jobs fairs. Coronavirus containment measures had, however, affected the efficiency of the interventions so steps were being taken to switch to digital alternatives where possible. Even so, these initiatives were believed by one decision-maker to be making a difference at a local level and were providing young people with sustained, tailored support. A further example given was where young people had shown an interest in vocational training like hair and beauty, the Job Centre work coaches were helping them to consider alternative opportunities or work that might be taken on temporarily until containment measures eased.

The Welsh Government's **Youth engagement and progression framework**³³ was described by one influencer as working quite well and being improved having reportedly experienced inconsistencies with engagement progression coordinators who delivered policy. Some would be managed by local authorities, some by civil society organisations, and some directly by the Welsh Government. They were now believed to be working a little more closely with civil society organisations.

According to a decision-maker, since April 2020, Communities for Work, the Parents Childcare and Employment (PaCE, discussed further in 5.9)³⁴ project, and Communities for Work Plus had between them engaged large numbers of people in the last ten months, divided between 16-24 year olds and those aged 25 or older. Of those a significant proportion had found employment as well: 'so the approach works' summed up this participant.

Even so, engagement had proved challenging because of the need to shift to digital channels. Similarly, third sector organisations stated that some young people felt uncomfortable engaging with mentors by phone or online and that a mentor's inability to visit the young people at their home sometimes made engagement harder.

³² See <https://workingwales.gov.wales/how-we-can-help/learning-new-skills/communities-for-work-plus>

³³ See <https://gov.wales/youth-engagement-and-progression-framework-implementation-plan>

³⁴ See <https://gov.wales/parents-childcare-and-employment-pace-project>

I know there are some, mentors do meet them in a café, where they feel more comfortable and maybe some mentors see them at home too. Since the pandemic, they can't do this, and people like that would fall through the net. They didn't respond to their phone calls, and it's not that mentors give up, but they also have other things to do. (Third sector)

You can't compete with face-to-face engagement. Some young people don't have the confidence to work in groups remotely when we're delivering our employability programme. That face-to-face contact, you can't compare with that and that has had a huge impact. (Third sector)

Additionally, there was **uncertainty** about the prospects of those programmes that were EU funded with funding tailing off over the next 18 months when demand was likely to increase and when Wales needed it most. Concerns were heightened by the uncertainty about whether money to replace EU funding would be dispersed through the Welsh Government or the UK Government. In general, according to some third sector organisations, short-term funding of initiatives and a perceived silo approach to their development meant that anything promising might not have enough time to reach its full potential.

A further aspect raised in relation to employability was how steps were being taken, according to one decision-maker, to join up policies aimed at helping people and young people find work. These steps required **effective partnership working**. The example was given of young people completing traineeships and coming into Universal Credit where they could take advantage of Kickstart opportunities. Work had also taken place so that the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) recognised Kickstart as a 'positive outcome' which helped with funding. In a final example given of linking interventions, there had reportedly been recent positive changes to apprenticeship eligibility for those on Kickstart which had emerged when reviewing possible pathways to employment.

From a **skills development** perspective, reference was made to the **Welsh Union Learning Fund**³⁵: the focus of the programme is to allow trade unions to develop the essential skills and employability of the workforce, with a particular emphasis on removing barriers for traditional non-learners. It works with employers and individuals to either upskill or reskill employees into new types of areas of work or to gain skills in the area that they are already working in. The scheme was believed to be 'extremely effective'. Applications had reportedly doubled in comparison to the previous year and it was anticipated that a proportion of those applications involved young people. Individuals wanted to upskill now they had the opportunity as well as wanting to change sectors. The figures were being explored further to establish where the biggest increases had been, and what could be gleaned regarding health and wellbeing.

Similarly, as part of an employability programme, a decision-maker explained how they were focusing on pre-employment programmes and **reskilling** 18-24 year olds via apprenticeships who might have sought work in more traditional sectors. It had reportedly

³⁵ See <https://businesswales.gov.wales/skillsgateway/skills-and-training-programmes/workplace-skills/wales-union-learning-fund-wulf>

been ‘really, really popular with young people’. In construction, the apprentice received a cash payment, a toolbox and guaranteed interview. A ‘COVID grant’ had been used to facilitate three such pathways involving construction, engineering and tourism / hospitality.

We developed three pathways actually. Engineering, construction and tourism and hospitality, but with a focus on accommodation services because that’s the part of the tourism and hospitality sector that had seen a little bit of recovery. But yeah, we’re seeing some really good take-up, and a little bit of a gender impact as well. I think we’ve had a few girls through the scheme as well - brilliant! (Decision-maker)

Another reportedly successful skills related example was a **junior apprenticeship scheme** for 14-16 year olds in a local authority. It adopted a preventive approach where learners of that age who were not engaging in an academic setting were given the opportunity to attend a FE college. Success was measured in the numbers obtaining a qualification, the numbers who stayed on in FE education to acquire further qualifications; and hearing qualitatively from individuals involved in the scheme. NEET figures in this local authority had decreased although it was not possible to establish the extent of the impact of the pandemic on the scheme.

Other reportedly successful regional initiatives, praised among third sector organisations, were **Mon CF**³⁶ and **ADTRAC**³⁷ in North West Wales. Both initiatives were described as being similar to Communities for Work in that they provided personalised support for 16-24 year olds to help them overcome barriers and improve their employment prospects.

One person who wasn’t willing to get out of the house, their mentor helped to get them out of the house, maybe took them for a walk in the period when we could meet them – two metres apart and so on. (Third sector)

[Mon CF] They offer a Journey to Work programme, so those who don’t drive and they feel they would like to drive, I would refer them to them to have driving lessons because they offer free driving lessons, and they offer other courses too, such as confidence building, looking at interview skills, work placements. If I feel someone lacks work experience, I would refer them to gain work experience to help them progress to work in the future. (Third sector)



Flexing of existing interventions where noted were welcomed. The Welsh Government’s **ReAct**³⁸ funding and increased investment in **Working Wales**³⁹ were further examples given of positive steps helping young people who had been made redundant, or had become unemployed, to improve their skills and training. Positive examples were also given of

³⁶ See <https://www.moncf.co.uk/>

³⁷ See <https://www.gllm.ac.uk/adtrac/>

³⁸ See <https://businesswales.gov.wales/skillsgateway/skills-and-training-programmes/react>

³⁹ See <https://workingwales.gov.wales/>

greater investment in **Personal Learning Accounts**⁴⁰ and looking at ‘green skills’ in relation to existing employability skills programmes. Even so, it was still thought on occasion that more needed to be done to ensure the programmes reached those most in need of support.

A perceived mobilisation from the Welsh Government of **technology and devices** was expected to benefit future generations and young people as it supported continued education and skills development and ultimately progression into employment. It was explained among third sector organisations that successful efforts had been made to equip disadvantaged young people with a device to get online so they could job search, stay in touch and continue with their studies.

5.2.1 Young people’s experiences of support

Among young people in this study who were seeking work, there were infrequent references to obtaining help from: Careers Wales (help with CVs or referrals to possible vacancies); Job Centre Plus, although this was not sought or particularly positively received; ADTRAC, employment agencies and WHP: JETS⁴¹. Those who had used external support reported mixed experiences.

A single mother who struggled with mental health conditions was offered training and support from Job Centre Plus. She was unable to take the offers up because no childcare was available and she had nobody to look after her daughter for the duration of the course. She also found the regular phone calls from the Job Centre frightening and was worried that she might lose her benefits. They would phone her every six months, saying the same thing every time, even though she had tried to explain that this made her very anxious and that she had no childcare for her daughter to allow her to find a job. This left her feeling that they really did not care about her or her daughter’s wellbeing.

They don’t care what your situation is. Who you are, how old you are. It is what it is. They just want you to work. They want you off the benefits and that’s it. No. You’ve reached your term of not having us on your back. Now we’re going to be on your back. You go get a job or we’re going to be ringing you every week. (Female, 18-24, dependent child)

Very occasionally, young people in North West Wales had used ADTRAC. One person had found and completed some training in make-up through the programme which she had appreciated. Another, however, commented that the help ADTRAC was able to provide during the pandemic was very limited. ADTRAC was unable to make home visits or set up face-to-face meetings and everything had to be done over the phone or via email. The lack of face-to-face support limited its usefulness for this participant.

One participant who had accessed WHP: JETS was not very positive about the experience. She described how ‘they go out, they look for jobs [for you]. It sounded perfect, then we only had four days training and then we were allowed to go out and do it. I didn’t feel like I

⁴⁰ See <https://workingwales.gov.wales/personal-learning-account>

⁴¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nation-s-job-hunt-jets-off>

was qualified enough or trained [for the roles]'. She stated that she mainly received periodic phone calls to see how she was doing and emails with links to information.

5.3 Employer engagement

Reference was made among a small number of decision-makers to **Regional Employment Response Groups**⁴² in Wales. The groups were proving helpful for planning what would happen where employers expected to reduce working hours or make redundancies once furlough came to an end. The groups' emphasis on considering the impact of unemployment on the household rather than just the individual was deemed important. Prior to the pandemic, the approach had helped to reduce adverse effects from these situations by engaging with major employers to ensure they were considering how best to make such changes in a way that had the lowest impact. Representative bodies as well as the Welsh Government, Public Health Wales and other partners had been involved.

5.4 Financial support

Furlough was highlighted as a successful financial intervention that was keeping people including young employees in jobs. However, as discussed at the start of this chapter, the security of those jobs in the longer term remained to be seen. Also, it was sometimes felt that the intervention had the potential to create 'closed sectors' with limited opportunity for young people to enter them with a first job.

The furlough has been really, really positive, but it kind of creates a dynamic within the labour market, so it kind of protects those who are in. So if you have a situation that, say for instance, furlough's extended from September because there's potentially some new [virus] variant, then I think you would need to think about an incentive particularly for young people coming into the other sectors. There's definitely schemes at the moment for people recruiting, but I think you want to have a think about exactly how the structured pathways work if essentially you've got closed sectors in the economy where the existing workers are being supported.
(Influencer)

Universal Credit reportedly played an important role in helping people of different ages including young people develop pathways to improving their lives. However, an issue was raised concerning young people reportedly not claiming this financial support when eligible (see 5.1).

In a further example, a third sector organisation described how they provided young people with financial support with utility bills via a **top-up card** so that they had more money for travel to work and for travel for interviews.

Financial support was crucial to some young people in this study, including benefits and furlough. Some had applied for and received Universal Credit. A small number with dependent children who were on Universal Credit commented how important the extra £20

⁴² See <https://gov.wales/written-statement-working-wales-and-employability-across-wales>

per week had been to them and were concerned about the prospect of this increase coming to an end. One of these parents also mentioned how useful the **local authority payment in lieu of free school meals** had proved during the pandemic.

*Obviously then if they do stop the extra [Universal Credit] money, I'm down 80 to 100 pounds a month, which is going to be really difficult for myself and the baby.
(Female, 18-24, dependent child)*

5.5 Health and wellbeing focused interventions related to employment



There were limited references to such support overall. Initiatives that existed before the pandemic to **support young people with mental health and wellbeing** were expected to continue to be essential via regional partnership boards⁴³, according to one influencer. There were links, for example, between Public Health Wales and schools to give teachers and others the skills needed to support young people's wellbeing and maintain their

resilience. Current approaches for measuring outcomes for children and young people was thought to be a way of keeping track of the difference interventions were making.

I know Public Health Wales have got an approach to mental health in schools but already, through the regional partnership board, we've got preventative roles in schools to provide support to children and young people. . . . I think it's just going to be more pronounced this year. . . . We've got a Public Service Board⁴⁴ suite of outcomes, as well as for the regional partnership board. So, I think we've got a plethora of outcomes, we just need to track those I think for children and young people. (Influencer)

In another example, a recent **DWP digital initiative** was outlined by a decision-maker which related to safeguarding and the digital delivery of Universal Credit. Customers had their own accounts and could message DWP. This new system picked up on key words so that, for example if there is a risk of self-harm, safeguarding leads would receive the alert and would be able to analyse and follow up as appropriate.

Additionally, mention was made of the importance of **trade unions** in providing advice on workers' rights and support for young people. This was reportedly being achieved through joined-up working between unions, DWP work coaches and the Welsh Government.

⁴³ See <https://gov.wales/regional-partnership-boards-rpbs>

⁴⁴ See <https://gov.wales/public-services-boards>

At a local level and as mentioned earlier in this section, some **third sector organisations** had worked closely with individuals to help them deal with mental health and self-confidence, such as encouraging a young person to leave the house.

5.6 Partnership working

More broadly, partnership working was deemed essential by some decision-makers and influencers for general employment challenges as well as for young people. Regional Skills Partnerships⁴⁵ and Employment Response Groups were thought to be interacting and engaging well, according to a few. The hope expressed by one participant was that it would be possible to better see how the local authorities viewed their economies changing in the future, so that support organisations could be agile enough to adapt to new or evolving industries.

It's about sustainability in the long term to create collaboration rather than competition, and how that could help in the field of youth unemployment. So the youth engagement and progression framework – the Welsh youth unemployment strategy – is being developed. (Influencer)

The implementation of the UK Government's **Restart scheme**⁴⁶ was considered a very positive example of joint working, according to one decision-maker. The scheme would give Universal Credit claimants who had been out of work for at least 12 months enhanced support to find jobs in their local area. Key to its success would be providers delivering a service tailored to local labour markets.

It's a really good story to tell of joint work and collaboration, as opposed to DWP just doing what it wants to do, or Welsh Government doing what it wants to do. (Decision-maker)

There was occasional reference to possible challenges faced by the Welsh Government of how it could work effectively to complement and add value to UK-wide policies and interventions and what exactly it should be doing in this space. A fear of duplicating UK Government interventions might mean 'steering away' from promising areas like Kickstart.

5.7 Accessing good, fair work

Interventions specifically linked with good, fair work tended not to be raised. According to an influencer, a **joined-up working approach** was also thought to be benefiting the effectiveness of Kickstart in Wales, with trade union guidance linking in with DWP work coaches. The approach was helping young people understand what their employment rights were. More generally, it was deemed a positive step that the Welsh Government was encouraging businesses to give **trade unions access to recruit members**, as part of efforts to make Wales a Fair Work nation⁴⁷. This kind of support on employment rights would help young people who had found a position during the pandemic and had not set foot in an

⁴⁵ See <https://businesswales.gov.wales/skillsgateway/skills-development/regional-skills-partnerships>

⁴⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restart-scheme/how-the-restart-scheme-will-work>

⁴⁷ See <https://www.tuc.org.uk/making-wales-fair-work-nation>

office. Without such guidance, explained the participant, it was harder for them to become aware of their rights because of limited conversations with colleagues and sometimes because of the way in which they were employed, for example as freelancers.

5.8 Interventions in other countries

Scotland's Developing the Young Workforce⁴⁸ programme was occasionally singled out as an effective means of ensuring no young people were left behind⁴⁹. Created before the pandemic, it is intended to strengthen collaboration and partnership in the design and planning of the curriculum in localities and regions across colleges, businesses and universities. Its infrastructure was reportedly now being used to deliver the COVID response.

Continuing to support young people as they transitioned was thought to be a valuable component of this programme and its **Youth Guarantee**⁵⁰. Colleges and universities would keep in contact with learners as they moved on, in effect 'watching over them' through the programme. A **structured pathway** into employment was deemed to be critical for success in the long-term for helping young people into work. During 2020 the scheme was believed to have delivered a number of apprentices close to the original target, despite the pandemic. Additionally, **Skills Development Scotland**⁵¹ was thought to be making a positive difference for young people by countering the challenge of having to compete with more experienced jobseekers by giving young people structured pathways into work.

Employers will ultimately employ the more experienced, and I think how you counter that is through the structured pathways, apprentices, programme supports and investment training the young people. And I think we have got better at that through the programme Skills Development Scotland. (Influencer)

The youth voice and civil society organisations like **YouthLink**⁵² and **Young Scot**⁵³ had, according to an influencer, been well represented in strategy development and were expected to be an important component to its success. The underpinning principle of No One Left Behind was thought to make the intervention more of a long-term vision for youth support, with a holistic approach and direct link with fair work.

It was suggested that there was potential learning to be gained from other countries where **youth unemployment was less of an issue**. Denmark was given as one example where there appeared to be less research on the subject because it was less of a problem and youth unemployment rates tended to be lower. It was explained that Danish citizens were funded by the government to take time to think about what they wanted to do with their careers. Researching solutions would therefore be beneficial.

⁴⁸ See <https://www.dyw.scot/>

⁴⁹ See <https://www.gov.scot/publications/no-one-left-behind-delivery-plan/>

⁵⁰ See <https://www.gov.scot/news/delivering-the-youth-guarantee/>

⁵¹ See <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/>

⁵² See <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/>

⁵³ See <https://young.scot/>

The **relationship between government and civil society organisations** in other nations in addressing youth unemployment could be explored further, suggested one participant. Quebec, Canada and Northern Ireland were given as examples where such organisations received core funding which reportedly resulted in more cohesive approaches to supporting young people. The networks of youth charities in Northern Ireland were considered much stronger as a result. Additionally, Northern Ireland was thought to be considering developing Kickstart by incentivising employers to keep young people on after the initial six-month period came to an end.

5.9 Supporting young people with dependent children

On occasion, **PaCE** (Parents, Childcare and Employment) was described by decision-makers as effectively supporting some in Wales with dependent children but was much smaller in scale than Communities for Work. Even so, it was deemed an essential programme for its younger cohort (16-24 year olds) in removing a key barrier to employment. The service had reportedly seen uptake significantly increase over the last two or three years pre-pandemic, but uptake had decreased over the last ten months and had not increased to the extent seen with Communities for Work Plus.

The take-up hasn't been huge, because of course the message is still very much, well, it's only there if it's essential – if you really can't cope. (Decision-maker)

In addition, there was reference to the benefit of most local authorities offering parents direct cash payments to cover **free school meals** rather than vouchers or food hampers during lockdown in Wales. This support had been welcomed by a young parent in this study.

6. Views on employment related changes that would benefit young people in Wales adversely affected by the pandemic's impact

- 6.1 Continue to enhance existing interventions**
- 6.2 Guaranteed work opportunities**
- 6.3 Focusing on the more disadvantaged groups of young people**
- 6.4 A sector focus for young people**
- 6.5 Alternative and additional skills and training for young people**
- 6.6 Tackling infrastructure barriers**
- 6.7 More partnership working and collaboration**
- 6.8 Health and wellbeing specific changes**
- 6.9 Increasing the chances for good, fair work**
- 6.10 What if we face a less positive future scenario?**
- 6.11 Supporting those with dependent children**
- 6.12 The system in Wales**

6. Views on employment related changes that would benefit young people in Wales adversely affected by the pandemic's impact

This chapter identifies themes from across participant type regarding what employment related interventions or changes were felt to be needed to help reduce the adverse impact the pandemic was having and would have on young people and future generations. Participants were also encouraged to consider what could be done regarding improving the chances of attaining or maintaining good, fair work. This included prompting them with a more positive and less positive scenario in a year's time regarding controlling COVID-19; and asking what steps might be needed to achieve a positive outcome for young people in both scenarios. Some young people and third sector organisations found this topic area challenging to respond to.

6.1 Continue to enhance existing interventions

Some decision-makers and influencers advised that there was more to be gained from focusing efforts on expanding **existing interventions** that had the potential to make a real difference rather than attempting to begin from scratch. It would likely prove more practical as well. A large amount of work was already thought to have been done on this subject which reinforced this point of view for a couple of participants. It was also occasionally argued that it would be better to focus on a small number of existing interventions rather than trying to spread resource too thinly and producing a list of 'undifferentiated' possibilities.

More to incentivise employers in terms of taking people on, in terms of apprenticeships. I think it's just ramping up existing provision and doing more. I'm not convinced we need to have a whole new suite of new interventions. (Decision-maker)

A further broad point made by a small number of participants was that the changes required to support young people needed to be, in effect, 'future scenario-neutral' as far as possible. Young people would need resilience no matter what, for example, and would need good support networks regardless.

6.2 Guaranteed work opportunities

Young people, decision-makers, influencers and third sector organisations regularly stressed that a key way of improving employment prospects for young people, in the shorter and longer term, was a **guaranteed offer** which could involve the continuation or expansion of existing interventions. It could include paid employment for six months (for example like Jobs Growth Wales) with the guarantee of a job interview at the end of it, work experience, placements, traineeships ('good pay when you're getting trained as well' suggested a young person) and employer-incentivised apprenticeships and junior apprenticeships. Certain schemes like incentivised apprenticeships might require a shift in focus to reflect the sectors where Welsh Government expected to see growth and intended to create jobs.

More funding towards degree apprenticeships and apprenticeships in general, and incentives for hiring those apprentices once they're qualified. Lead you into a meaningful job that you care about and you're qualified for (Female, 18-24, in education)

I think more companies should be making trainee posts available to get more young people getting onto the ladder. . . I got into accounting through a trainee post. So, I've been quite lucky to have that opportunity. I think that more companies across different sectors offering trainee posts would be more beneficial for young people. (Male, 18-24, secure employment)

The best way to prepare somebody for a job is to give them a job. What we found in the past with things like Jobs Growth Wales and other interventions was that if we subsidised employers to provide placements for young people, that helps enormously. (Decision-maker)

You guarantee them an apprenticeship or a place in college or something up until a certain age, and then that generally equips them with more skills. . . . We won't leave anyone behind. (Decision-maker)

If we had a situation where the government said, 'when young people go into the workplace, they should be able to have at least six to ten hours a week work'. So that they're in a position that whatever happens, they know that they'll have six to ten hours a week. They could apply for Universal Credit and have that money topped up to be able to afford to live, so they can start off small. (Third sector)

Young people also suggested setting quotas so that employers would have to interview a certain number of young people for every post. Free, accessible **training courses** would also help, some felt. This could help when competing with more experienced candidates. Introducing online or remote work experience options could be added to CVs to help in this respect as well.

It was considered important to ensure that young people achieved something **tangible** at the end of it to support their progression, for example a qualification. Some decision-makers and influencers commented that previous and current interventions highlighted that giving young people this kind of opportunity, particularly disadvantaged young people, was an effective policy. It was essential that the effectiveness of interventions was genuinely measurable and used control groups, advised one influencer, rather than relying on fairly brief reported effectiveness from individuals or employers.

In a similar vein, an **extension to Kickstart** could help as well, believed some decision-makers and influencers, because of the longer than initially anticipated containment measures and impact on the economy. Its extension could then link in with DWP's **Restart Scheme**⁵⁴. It might also need to be more generous to employers if the scheme or something similar was to truly help the most disadvantaged young people, predicted one influencer.

⁵⁴ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restart-scheme>

There could also be more of a role for existing interventions which were intended to help the economically inactive into sustainable work with higher rates of pay, like **ReAct**.

I think the Welsh Government couldn't do this alone, that a long-term equivalent of Kickstart, probably expanded, which subsidises the employment of young people – kind of like a job guarantee really. . . . If they've been NEET for a certain period, there will be a subsidised job made available. . . . I'd make it impossible for people to be long-term NEET, unless they were determined to be inactive. (Influencer)



Structured pathways for young people into employment built on the approaches outlined above would be essential according to some influencers. They would also help to counter the challenge of employers choosing to employ more experienced candidates. Continuing to **support young people as they transitioned** was thought to be a valuable component of Scotland's Developing the Young Workforce programme. As described in 5.1 education providers would maintain the relationship with their learners through the programme.

There's much more of an acceptance among young people that you give what you can and then you're spat out and you hope to take some experience with you, rather than it being about development and leaving the internship or volunteering post with some sort of genuine, even tangible qualification or experience. (Influencer)

Some 18-24 year olds also felt that they would benefit from **better careers advice and support**, to better prepare young people for the world of work and the prospect of retraining when necessary. It was deemed essential to raise awareness of the different advice and support options available.

In general, once you leave college, there's quite a big gap with support. I told my college I didn't want to go to uni, that I wanted to look for a job. As far as my college and local authorities [were concerned] – I don't have a job or anything, no one's messaged me or emailed me to say 'What are you doing?'. I think there's probably a lot of people that could've fallen down into that trap and may well not be doing anything, and nobody's aware or trying to help them. Because I wouldn't know who to look up or call, had I not got a job. (Male, 18-24, apprenticeship)

In addition to the reported efficacy of subsidising the private sector to provide guarantees for young people, there were also recommendations among decision-makers and influencers that the **public sector itself** could do more to attract younger people into its workforce as part of efforts to tackle the issue. It was occasionally acknowledged that local authorities did not do enough to employ young people. This step would also help to address the perceived issue of the public sector in Wales having an ageing workforce, felt some. There could be a role for the public sector to achieve 'youth friendly status as an employer'.

As a short term idea, there was a suggestion that young people who had experienced difficulties completing their vocational qualifications because of the pandemic could still be taken on by employers who would then be incentivised to help the young people **complete their qualifications while working**. More **incentivisation generally of the FE sector** to grow the number of learners was also suggested.

Any interventions that incentivised employers would need to be **straightforward** to administer and robustly **measurable** for impact, decision-makers and influencers occasionally added. Changes made early on during the lockdown had highlighted how the public and private sector could move quite swiftly when needed. **Speed** was considered of the essence because of what was at stake with young people's circumstances. The hardest hit were likely to become even more disenfranchised and the disruption to educational development and careers had been significant for many.

6.3 Focusing on the more disadvantaged groups of young people

Decision-makers and influencers regularly believed that it was essential to focus policies and interventions on young people **most likely to be hardest hit** by the pandemic and recession. These were believed to be young people with lower skills who would struggle to enter the labour market regardless of the pandemic; NEET young people; and those in their last years of compulsory education who were disengaged. Additional (protected) characteristics like ethnicity among young people also needed to be understood and considered with this approach. Other groups would, it was felt, still likely suffer to an extent because of the pandemic but were more likely to be better equipped to progress once containment measures had eased. The gap between non-deprived and deprived young people was anticipated to have widened even more during the lockdown, so it was crucial to focus on support for more disadvantaged young people to prevent the gap from widening further.

My policy area has just kind of widened. So, the ones that have got access to the internet, the ones that have got access to peer support, the ones that have got parents with sharp elbows will get on, and the ones that don't, won't. And it will be even harder – their world will shrink and other people's worlds will expand. (Decision-maker)

The last recession hit BME younger workers the hardest, and if you look at the latest sets of figures from ONS it's the same thing again. So you're talking about they've been hit twice in a very short space of time. And then if you take into account the cuts in terms of support for youth services again significantly impacted younger BME people – so I think that the focus should be there. (Influencer)

A more focused approach would also make sense in terms of having the greatest impact with budgets available, given the **uncertainty about future employability funding** as EU support came to an end, anticipated one decision-maker. Even so, it was thought that ministers could not commit to long-term strategies because of the upcoming election in Wales.

We've got to be smarter. . . . The Welsh Government launched its employability plan back in March to May '18, which talked about simplifying and streamlining our employability and skills provision. I would absolutely go and deliver on that, because we just will not be able to afford to duplicate provision. We've got to target what we've got, what limited resources we've got, and we've got to target those people who need it most. (Decision-maker)

More broadly, according to one influencer, macro-level changes like **reducing austerity** and providing **greater funding of public services** would help to decrease inequality and reversals of statutory sector cuts of services that supported young people like youth and leisure centres.

According to a small number of decision-makers and influencers, disadvantaged young people who lacked support networks might also benefit from help in developing **resilience** and being able to consider new opportunities for employment. It might be the case that this was necessary as a foundation on which to invest in new training and work experience interventions. Additionally, the job market might change, with more remote working roles where specific skills would be required and the need for self-motivation would increase. Improved resilience was also expected to benefit young people's health and wellbeing.

However, reaching these young people could still be problematic if a spatial approach was used to reach young people who needed support the most, warned an influencer and decision-maker. It was deemed inefficient and 'weak' because many non-deprived people live in deprived areas, and many deprived people live in relatively affluent areas.

To help close the education attainment gap, some thought that those who had particularly suffered during the containment measures could take part in **additional weeks of education** during school holidays. There were sometimes longer term suggestions among decision-makers and influencers that it might benefit some young people to spend **more time in education**, supported by greater investment in the FE sector. It would be not only to allow time for new employment opportunities to emerge but also to enable young people to develop their skills further. Decision-makers and influencers occasionally queried whether the Welsh Government's support for education and training was in the right place. Its package of support for higher education students, for example, was reportedly more generous than it was in England. It might be better to **shift more funding towards further education** or remedial training for young people who are 'getting left behind'.

I think whole school or whole cohort intervention won't cut it, because it won't close the gap. . . . If you had the kids in for a few weeks over Easter and over the summer, all that will do is everyone will benefit. If you're worried about the kids who have fallen behind, you have to have more focused, targeted intentions. (Influencer)

We need as many people to stay in education as possible to protect them from the difficult labour market. It might be unrealistic unless we provide enough support for young people to do that, so it's not just the quality of the courses available, but actually you get very generous support when it's higher education. . . . There is absolutely none of that for further education. So that is a real concern. (Influencer)

Although not pandemic specific, there was a call among third sector organisations for the **Carer's Allowance⁵⁵ to be amended** to enable young carers to continue studying without losing their benefits.

if you're doing more than 21 hours of study a week you lose your Carer's Allowance. I've had young people who've had to drop out of college. I had a young person who's fantastic, and he wanted to be [in the health sector] and he was training at college, and he loved it and it was like, 'I've found my thing'; and then he realised that he couldn't afford to buy food, and petrol to get his mum to the doctors. He had to drop out of his course to be able to afford to live. And young people shouldn't have to make that choice. (Third sector)

For the longer term mental health of children and young people, it was deemed important by one influencer that young people were engaged in education, employment or training up to the age of 21, as recommended in Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review⁵⁶. Also in the longer term, a more skilled young workforce might help to attract better jobs to Wales. However, a contrasting view was expressed that spending longer in education would simply delay the issue and result in a 'glut' of young people competing for jobs.

Similarly, more could be done, thought some young people, decision-makers and influencers, to support disadvantaged young people with better **digital connectivity**. This could include supporting learners in FE with laptops and connectivity, to ensure they could continue to learn. It would also facilitate more home-based careers options and flexible working patterns, so that young people could be enabled to **work from home** wherever possible. More promotion of the Education Maintenance Allowance⁵⁷ could be considered as well.



It's a bit concerning that there's no support regarding that, really. Increasing the connectivity or whatever, is only going to help people who are already connected. Not the people who get left behind. (Male, 18-24, employed)

Junior apprenticeship schemes for 14-16 year olds, commented one decision-maker, could be more widely available. They could help to prevent less engaged young people from being left behind on finishing school and give them the opportunity to stay on in education and develop their skills and qualifications.

Looking much further ahead to future generations, an influencer advised that efforts should continue to **prevent the issues during childhood** before they arise. Evidence suggested that it was very expensive and often in practice impossible to remediate some of the issues

⁵⁵ See <https://www.gov.uk/carers-allowance>

⁵⁶ See <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review>

⁵⁷ See <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/fe/information-for-parents/education-maintenance-allowance.aspx>

experienced by disadvantaged young people. More could be done, this individual felt, to monitor how grants were used that were given to schools in deprived areas for this purpose.

6.4 A sector focus for young people

Some decision-makers and influencers pointed to concerns that certain industries which traditionally employed large numbers of young people might not recover sufficiently to provide the required levels of opportunity. They suggested that the outcomes for young people could be improved by developing a **greater focus on 'green jobs' and adapting to changes within sectors**, such as retail's move to more online and digital offerings and 'green tourism'. The perceived growth in environmental concerns during the pandemic could be capitalised upon, thought some, with more focus on related sectors which in turn were reportedly more likely to offer skilled roles with reasonable pay.

What I'd like to see is involving more and more youngsters of that age group in that net zero carbon plan because that's where they're at, at the moment, and that's what they want to do so let's use them to the extent we can. (Decision-maker)

It was advised that this would require investment in supporting **reskilling** funds and in supporting young people, especially those furthest away from the labour market, to consider these alternative career aspirations. This shift would not only benefit young people experiencing employment challenges but also help local and national government meet climate change targets, including via 'make work schemes', for example: tree planting, conservation efforts, decarbonising homes, and offsite construction. Skills offers would also need to be aligned with City Deal⁵⁸ plans on a green recovery, explained another decision-maker. Opportunities to retrain or change sectors was also a suggestion from among young people in this study.

I know certainly in England, the UK Government has put a significant investment into the green agenda and offering grants to homes. . . . Wales does it on a much smaller scale. So there are opportunities around that. And you've got green tourism. There's areas of that we'll be looking at to try and stimulate the economy. (Decision-maker)

I think maybe the government offering some sort of courses on getting a different job. (Male, 18-24, employed)

Provide new training courses for free, and not make us pay. For different jobs, even though you're in a different line of work, if you wanted to learn something else, they could provide that. More variety I'd say, with no cost. Or some just to cost a little. (Female, 18-24, on furlough)

It was argued by decision-makers on occasion that although 'make work schemes' had sometimes proved less effective in the past during periods of high unemployment, where jobs were created for tasks that did not necessarily need completing, there could be a role for them in the future with **public sector** intervention. It could focus on young people and

⁵⁸ See <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld11264/cr-ld11264-e.pdf>

jobs that needed doing even if on a temporary basis, to provide valuable experience. At the end of the process, young people would emerge with new skills and increase their chances of employability in the private sector having effectively been 'over-trained'.

Every part of the UK's got a public sector that's very busy, it's got lots to do. So collectively we could take on a good chunk of those people doing work from picking litter to providing social care to helping out with children in schools. . . . Even if it's on a short-term basis, and it gives them all a fighting chance. (Decision-maker)

However, a contrasting view was expressed by one participant who did not think 'artificial job creation' would have a role to play, based on past evidence. Work experience and roles in the private sector were deemed more beneficial to young people, this influencer felt, especially those with lower skills and qualifications.

A further suggestion among third sector organisations, decision-makers and influencers on the theme of sectors was to support and encourage more young people where appropriate to look for jobs outside their locality that could be done **from home**. A third sector organisation had found that working from home was suiting young people with anxiety issues and some disabled learners. Additionally, there could be better support for more **rurally based sectors** like agriculture and energy rather than a perceived current urban focus which was less useful for young people in rural locations. More could be done to give young people who had returned to rural communities because of lockdown, as well as future generations, a reason to remain there. One regional decision-maker explained how they were taking steps already to attract creative industries to the area which was helping to create new jobs. It also helped with the seasonality issue of hospitality and accommodation as those involved in certain creative industries like film were spending more time in the region for work.

I think there needs to be more work that can be done from home. The future is technology. I think the sooner we can jump on the bandwagon the better. It'll open up a lot more opportunities for people, I think especially for those who can't travel an hour to the city. If they can work from home after the lockdown, that'd be great. (Third sector)

Increasing **investment** in sectors that had been affected and that provided many local jobs, and in local town centres, was suggested among young people. For some it would mean not having to travel so far to try to find work, for example from the South Wales Valleys to Cardiff.

Taking a different perspective, decision-makers, influencers and third sector organisations on occasion commented how retail and hospitality businesses had often been very **agile and innovative** in their attempts to keep trading, for example greater use of digital for ordering food, launching delivery services, greater emphasis on distribution and so on. These changes had in some ways been emerging before the pandemic but had been accelerated once coronavirus struck. These sectors should still have a lot to give young people as the nation emerged from lockdown, they felt, and required tailoring of skills available for young people to take advantage of the adjustments like a greater focus on distribution.

Additionally, there was expected to be **pent-up demand** for certain roles as the nation emerged from coronavirus containment measures. There were also likely to be many people who had managed to save money they would have normally spent which could kickstart the economy. They were, argued one decision-maker, likely to spend in the sectors in which young people were employed, meaning there could be quite a rapid uptake of young people again into employment. It was anticipated on occasion that while it was right to explore and encourage employment via apprenticeships and less traditional sectors for young people, the bulk of employment would remain in the more traditional service sectors that employ large numbers of young people. Even now, it was noted, there were long delays for online grocery shopping home delivery slots, for example, which suggested employment opportunities. Also, it was expected that businesses would continue to adapt where they could to increase the opportunities for jobs where an employee could work from home.

Another sector related suggestion among decision-makers was to invest heavily in encouraging young people into the **health and social care** because of the significant needs in these areas even before the pandemic hit. It might be possible, thought one decision-maker, to capitalise on the strong goodwill that had been shown for health and social care staff, who had continued to work throughout the pandemic, to develop better terms and conditions for them. There was not thought by this participant to have been any changes in NHS recruitment strategies since the pandemic started so there was a question whether overseas health professionals would be as keen to come to work in the UK as they had been previously. A regional decision-maker explained how they intended to invest in developing care as a more attractive career.

They're poorly paid. There's no future to it. They just do what they do, day in day out. So what I've said in terms of care and in terms of that offer, . . . that we look at creating care as a career, with career opportunities that they can progress, with qualifications as well along the way, a pathway for progression. (Decision-maker)

6.5 Alternative and additional skills and training for young people

As alluded to in 6.4 it was important, explained some participants, to look at ways in which young people could be supported during **transitions** into work or into employment in sectors that they might not have previously considered. This could involve exploring how **mentoring and coaching** could be effectively made available to young people, especially at transition points. Partnership working would be key to help make this happen, among local authorities, government and public service boards.

Some also stated that it was essential to develop the skills of young people in a way that the skills were **transferable** between sectors because it was not possible to second guess which sectors were going to thrive or suffer. Such skills would include literacy, numeracy and interpersonal skills, predicted one decision-maker. Training and skills that gave them opportunity to work in a **more distanced way** where it was not possible to work from home was deemed important on occasion as well. These types of skills and this type of support were anticipated by some to be especially important should the pandemic continue into next year with regular containment measures. Giving greater emphasis to teaching

entrepreneurship as part of the curriculum was a further suggestion, together with expanding on and learning from promising signs of engagement in entrepreneurship initiatives.

The sector you thought was going to be growing dramatically turns out not to grow dramatically. What's important is that you develop transferable skills. (Influencer)

An example was given of recent evidence suggesting that **interpersonal skills** were becoming increasingly important for young people with lower skills or qualifications to possess, to improve their chances of entering the labour market. It was believed that large job creations for young people had recently been in the service sector, where interpersonal skills and 'presentability' helped people to secure a job. Finding ways of inculcating and developing those kinds of skills was important but also expected to be challenging.

6.6 Tackling infrastructure barriers



A further example of what could be done in the longer term to help young people into work was to overcome **public transport** barriers, according to some decision-makers, influencers and third sector organisations. Good quality, affordable, integrated public transport including in rural areas would help to enable young people into employment and provide wider opportunities for employment. Subsidised travel for young people would help as well. Prior to the pandemic and with funding from the Welsh Government, Communities for Work, explained one decision-maker, had linked an employer with South Wales Valleys based new employees for shift work with tailored travel arrangements. Subsequent work had taken place with local authorities on reviewing public transport timetables in the area to better meet economic needs.

Transport is key. A lot of young people don't have their own means of transport. They are reliant on public transport services. At the moment, the capacity is vastly reduced and it's also unreliable. I think that's a massive barrier for young people, so they are needing the finances up front to be able to pay for your weekly bus ticket, or monthly bus ticket, before you get paid. It's quite expensive as well. (Third sector)

Ongoing work involving **City Deals**, commented decision-makers on occasion, was expected to begin to address transport issues especially in those areas within a region that did not normally attract much investment, for example more rural communities. This would benefit young people among others in the long term, not having to necessarily travel so far for work and being able to stay within their preferred communities.

There are some significant issues about rural transport which do disadvantage younger people. So younger people have got to run a car and pick up quite a lot of

extra expenses through doing that. . . . That's what we're focused on with the City Deal. It's about how we work to put parity and create opportunity in those areas which haven't received the investment. (Decision-maker)

On a related note, a decision-maker suggested that paying for young people to obtain their **driving licence** to help service the logistics sector that had expanded during the pandemic with home deliveries could be beneficial. They would need to be supported with adequate PPE and training on safe working. A similar intervention in the past had reportedly helped approximately one thousand people into work.

Affordable housing and social housing would help young people with bills, debt, and proximity to a work location if necessary, anticipated a small number of decision-makers and influencers. This could involve exercising rent controls to support young people who, for example, were furloughed and on the minimum wage. It would also mean young people would be able to move out of their parents' home.

6.7 More partnership working and collaboration

Benefits would be gained, advised an influencer, from stronger collaboration between civil society organisations and **between these organisations and government** when developing policy and interventions. As highlighted in 5.8, examples could be learned from Quebec, Canada and Northern Ireland where civil society organisations were believed to have more strategic influence. They reportedly had a much more integrated role with policy and statutory operations – not only as delivering vehicles, but also as influencers of strategy. This approach, combined with core funding for these organisations, would help to deliver more sustained support and longer term influence in Wales which in turn would help with empowerment of young people, capacity and confidence building.

I think the role of civil society has been really problematic in the past, where civil society organisations have been doing the same work to get young people not just employed but building confidence, and so on, and hitting policy targets but not being involved in the policy at all. And that's a problem with the statutory sector as well in Wales. So it's those links between statutory national devolved government and civil society, and how that could work much better. It seems like a bit of a no-brainer. (Influencer)

Similarly, noted a decision-maker, **co-ordinated and aligned collaboration** would also be needed between the Welsh Government and the DWP to ensure that all the work undertaken to support young people was cohesive and did not result in duplication, overlap and programmes competing for young people.

A regional decision-maker described how local authorities had been able to capitalise on the economic impact of the coronavirus by building **stronger and broader relationships with businesses**. There was emerging, good quality engagement with some employers who had been accessing support and funding. The intention was to explore the potential for new employment opportunities with these employers. It would therefore be essential to ensure that **businesses were fully aware of the support and advice** they could access to help

survive and grow which would mean greater potential for employment opportunities for young people.

6.8 Health and wellbeing specific changes

Social prescribing of work was thought to play an important role with mental health and wellbeing, remarked a couple of decision-makers. However, the challenges of identifying suitable roles and consulting with health professionals because of the pandemic were recognised. Initial discussions to roll out a social prescribing intervention nationally prior to the pandemic could be explored once more, according to a decision-maker. Also, the way in which **occupational health in the workplace** was viewed needed to shift radically to ensure that there was adequate support for mental as well as physical health, warned another decision-maker.

Our work has stalled because of COVID, but we had some really good conversations about, for example, how we could work better with GP practices. Linking up work as a same status as a clinical outcome. So, if you get somebody back into work, all the evidence does suggest people in work have better health and structure in their lives, that sort of thing. (Decision-maker)

Some third sector organisations believed that young people's health and wellbeing would benefit if there was an **explicit responsibility on employers** to ensure they supported young people who were at the beginning of their careers or in their first jobs. They suggested mentors for each young person in the workplace that they could turn to for advice and guidance. It was also suggested that employers should be required to have a more active role in young people's career development by regularly offering them the opportunities to upskill and develop.

Additionally, it was believed by an influencer that different services needed to link together more effectively to support young people whose mental health and wellbeing were affected by their employment challenges. This could involve DWP staff making **referrals to mental health support services** via Jobcentre Plus.

A more **holistic approach** to youth unemployment was advised by one influencer to support health and wellbeing, rather than focusing solely on whether or not the individual was employed. Other factors needed to be considered such as distance from the labour market and developing interventions based on that distance or how long they have been employed or unemployed. The UK Government approach was believed to be more focused on just getting people into work - a 'work first approach' (see 5.1). Similarly, a greater focus on developing **resilience** among young people as described in 6.3 was expected to deliver health and wellbeing benefits.

In the longer term, starting early in terms of social determinants likely to affect employment opportunities was considered key by an influencer. Tackling child poverty and a preventive approach to employment and health issues was expected to be needed to improve opportunities for young people and future generations who were most disadvantaged by the pandemic.

6.9 Increasing the chances for good, fair work



Some influencers, decision-makers and third sector organisations stressed the importance of ensuring **the voice of young people**, including those who might not yet have work experience, was part of the process of co-producing solutions and interventions. For example, there was thought to be a distinct lack of young people and other diversity characteristics represented on the regional boards set up in Wales to look at the economy and regional needs. In the longer term, young people needed to be encouraged and enabled into political representation to ensure their voices were heard. Young people's involvement also needed to be **authentic** and to be seen to have an impact to avoid further disengagement.

It shouldn't just be decided in isolation by decision-makers. . . . [You need] that lived experience side of it as well. . . . Simple sort of involvement in board structures and in management and things like that because you just bring a different voice then into solutions, really, for some of these issues rather than a kind of 'doing to' sort of a situation. (Influencer)

A related point made among 18-24 year olds was that employers and universities should take a **'more holistic view' of young people's potential**, given that their education and training had been impacted so much by the pandemic.

Raising the minimum wage was sometimes put forward among decision-makers, influencers, third sector organisations and 18-24 year olds as a key change required to give young people a better opportunity for accessing good, fair work. Doing away with zero-hour contracts and setting requirements in areas like sick and holiday pay and caring responsibilities were occasionally suggested as well. It was anticipated among third sector organisations that greater prevalence of fair work could also result in employers and society more generally growing to **value more what young people have to offer**. There were expected to be challenges given that employment regulation was not devolved; however, according to one participant, there might be a means of overcoming this with devolved powers relating to COVID-19 emergency powers.

The minimum wage definitely needs to go up. Why would I want to go into a job where I'm doing more work than other people and getting paid way less? There needs to be a change in society's view on younger people. Why would you feel valued if that's all you're going to get paid? (Third sector)

We could outlaw zero-hours contracts. We should make requirements for longer term rostering of staff. We could make requirements for other terms and conditions to do with sick pay, holiday pay, entitlement for people with caring responsibilities. (Decision-maker)

In addition to raising the minimum wage, it was also suggested among young people in this study that more opportunities for fixed hours contracts would give them more stability and reassurance - zero-hour contracts were better than being unemployed but not ideal.

It's just not fair because it's not stable at all. People can take advantage a little bit, especially if you haven't worked for two or three days and then last minute they ask you to come in. Especially if you've got children or something like that. (Female, 18-24, unemployed)

According to a small number of decision-makers and influencers, some of Professor Dickens' recommendations in the Fair Work Wales report to the Welsh Government⁵⁹ should be implemented to better support young people in achieving fair work. Additionally, strengthening social partnership in Wales via the Social Partnership Bill⁶⁰ was expected to play an important role in creating fairer work conditions.

Some, mainly influencers, also advised that any business in receipt of Welsh Government funding or incentives for work or employability schemes should be required to **meet certain conditions** related to good, fair work, such as paying the real living wage, apprenticeships paying the minimum wage and giving trade union access to staff. Stressing the commercial benefits to the employer of participating was also recommended. There was felt by one participant to be the potential to ask more of larger employers who had signed up to funding via the Economic Resilience Fund⁶¹, for example with taking on apprenticeships, offering more favourable contracts and favouring greener sectors. In addition (and if not already in place) the Welsh Government could ensure that during its procurement processes, fair work practices were locked in.

You partner up with the right sort of organisations. To a certain extent, we know where the employers are that don't adhere to fair work, and they're in a minority, thankfully. You can choose your partners, and it's in everybody's interest to make this work. (Influencer)

More could also be done to encourage employers to engage with the Welsh Government's **Economic Contract**⁶², advised a decision-maker, other than those required to because they had sought government business support. There were, however, challenges to overcome in monitoring businesses that signed up to the contract and challenges for some small businesses to deliver to the contract.

A further approach to encourage the provision of good fair work, especially for young people, would be to **focus investment in sectors** of the economy which were likely to be stronger in the future and to recognise that the world is changing, believed decision-makers on occasion. Further individual points made on increasing opportunities for young people to access good, fair work included the following:

⁵⁹ See <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/fair-work-wales.pdf>

⁶⁰ See <https://gov.wales/more-equal-wales-strengthening-social-partnership-white-paper>

⁶¹ See <https://businesswales.gov.wales/coronavirus-advice/support/financial-support-and-grants>

⁶² See <https://businesswales.gov.wales/economic-contract>

- **Trade unions** should continue to be involved in joined-up working with the Welsh Government and DWP to negotiate on intervention design, and deliver support and advice on workers' rights;
- In the longer term, **structural barriers** to accessing good, fair work should also be removed, for example by offering the ability to work flexibly. Addressing pay gaps by protected characteristic would also benefit young people as well as others;
- Tackling the practice of 'fire and rehire' on poorer terms and conditions among some employers; and preventing the possibility of 'no job, no job' policies, both of which were expected to make it difficult for young people to obtain and retain fair work.

In some cases, decision-makers and influencers felt that it was a more of case of **doing what was right for the young person**, and that expecting good fair work for all, in all situations might not be very pragmatic at least in the shorter term, particularly given the state of the labour market and certain sectors. A full-time job or career might not be the first step required for an individual who had been out of work or was furthest from the labour market. It was also argued that getting young people into work or on the first rung of the work experience ladder was much more important than 'what somebody else feels fair or decent is'. Fair work could mean different things to different people, depending on their circumstances.

Lots of the people [my colleague] speaks to just want a job. They don't care about fair work. They don't care about green industries of the future! They just want income. So we have to sort of try and ensure that our programmes recognise that. (Influencer)

We want people in secure, fair, paid employment, but I think we have to be realistic about what the market is like at the moment, and for some people it's about getting on the first rung in the ladder – getting that experience in, have it under their belt, then progress. (Decision-maker)

In addition, according to a couple of influencers, a move like increasing the minimum wage for young people should be treated with **caution**. Young people were thought to generate less value-added for employers because they had less experience. Insisting on the same pay and conditions for young people as older, more experienced workers was viewed as a 'really high-risk strategy' by one participant. Also, rules and regulations that prevented young people from taking on certain part-time or gig economy jobs might limit the flexibility some young people need as well as limiting potential valuable experience opportunities. Furthermore, in the shorter term, businesses struggling to continue to operate because of the pandemic might not be able to meet all the good, fair work requirements. Business support was also therefore critical.

6.10 What if we face a less positive future scenario?

In a less positive future scenario where containment measures continued to be needed and the impact of vaccinations was limited, participants' suggestions were largely based on the themes described above, with an even greater emphasis on young people most

disadvantaged, job or apprenticeship guarantees and employer incentives, appropriate skills development, 'make work' schemes, and facilitating digital connectivity.

A **guaranteed job**, especially for more disadvantaged young people, was emphasised by some in this context. **Subsidised** work would reportedly be even more important, and would be more beneficial than simply ensuring a basic income (via benefits). It would have the added potential positive impact on health and wellbeing through improved self-esteem, confidence and prosocial behaviours in adverse conditions. DWP's Restart Scheme⁶³ would be expected to take on a key role, according to a decision-maker, so that unemployed young people would be flowing into it by 2022. However, care would be needed to protect against the displacement effect of employers laying off older staff to take on young employees via an incentivised scheme. Incentives could relate to subsidised salaries, business rates or tax breaks. A wage for training could also be considered, based on likely sector demand.

Greater emphasis was suggested among decision-makers and influencers on investing in **skills and lower level pathways development**, and **transferable and interpersonal skills**. These steps would widen an individual's opportunities and could be matched to a changed labour market, with more focus on **climate related sectors** which need to offer good work. Additionally, the issues with face-to-face contact and travel in a negative future scenario could be capitalised on by supporting more young people to develop the skills required for **home working**, including having the **technology** needed to do so. **Resilience** skills would then become even more critical with potentially less mentoring and coaching in job roles where home working was commonplace.

I could work from home, but they just won't let me, for whatever reason. . . . But I think they should allow us to work from home, so our job is guaranteed, and put better things in place because if this is going to carry on it needs to change doesn't it? (Female, 18-24, on furlough)

Some decision-makers and influencers foresaw that effective **joint working** between different organisations like the Welsh Government and DWP would be essential. An extension of Kickstart or perhaps a Welsh Government version of the scheme co-funded with the DWP could be developed, further incentivising employers to take on young people. More **sustained relationships** would also be needed between young people and those who support them into work.

Three further occasional suggestions among decision-makers and influencers were: the public sector focusing more effectively on developing opportunities for young people within its own organisations; financial support for young people to **continue in education**; and **immune certificates** which could be issued to young people to give them the mobility to work and reflecting how the virus was less likely to affect young people. This would reduce the need for population-wide constraints. To support this approach, more could be invested in developing NHS capacity and roles that young people could fill.

⁶³ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restart-scheme>

For such interventions, the government would need to be a much more **active broker and creator of work**, envisaged one decision-maker. The brokerage function was described as generally being carried out by the Welsh Government for school-age people through Careers Wales, by UK Government through Jobcentre Plus for older people, and by private organisations for those who were in specialist occupations. It was deemed possible that if technological change and delivery change were seen because of a combination of automation and the pandemic, and if significant changes were needed that the private sector was apparently reluctant to invest in, there could be a role for government intervention. This could involve taking on some of the risk, piloting new ways of doing things or supporting businesses to do so.

6.11 Supporting those with dependent children

Some young people including parents thought **better, low cost or free childcare provision** would make a great difference to employment opportunities. One suggestion was to extend nursery school provision to full school days (even if only for part of the week), to facilitate both partners working. Another suggestion more broadly was creating childcare initiatives in communities.

*If the nursery could offer us two full days a week and three half days a week. That means we can both work two full days a week each and do the work between us then.
(Female, 18-24, dependent child)*



Decision-makers and influencers were less likely to volunteer changes directly linked to supporting young people with dependent children. Any changes, surmised some decision-makers and influencers, were likely to be a matter of regulation and / or subsidy and the ability to offer affordable childcare. The challenge would be to what extent there were the powers and the funds to do so. One suggestion was to explore how to support young parents with repaying their growing debt resulting from unemployment and the pandemic. Another idea was encouraging and facilitating job-share opportunities for those with dependent children. According to a decision-maker, steps were being taken to explore the feasibility of extending the availability of childcare to parents in training and education.

Third sector organisations occasionally felt that employers ought to be more understanding and aware of the challenges facing parents, especially with the impact of the pandemic, and so should offer more flexibility.

6.12 The system in Wales

A possible change raised by an influencer was to consider tackling youth unemployment as if it were a **structural problem**, for example linked with other issues like poverty, geography, education, economics and mental health, rather than treating unemployment as the individual's fault and responsibility. Job-seeking, for example, was greatly emphasised in UK Government welfare reforms. There was believed to be evidence showing that a structural approach was beneficial but more empirical evidence was thought to be needed on the subject.

A further macro-level suggestion from another influencer was for a cohesive '**Welsh benefits system**'. It was reported that substantial sums were currently spent annually on Welsh benefits which all functioned independently of each other. It was argued that if it operated as one system, there would be a reduction in bureaucracy and administration and financial support could be managed more effectively, more generous, easier to access and more effective in tackling poverty.

It's a huge amount of money relative to their budget and there's no kind of review in terms of are they actually doing the things they're meant to be doing because they're all fingers in different pots of money in different places. (Influencer)

7. Research questions and knowledge gaps

7.1 Build on what is already working

7.2 Mental health and wellbeing

7.3 Identifying focused information needs on which to act

7.4 Understanding what the labour market would look like for young people

7.5 The impact of employment challenges on dependent children of young people

7.6 Wales versus UK-level data

7.7 What young people want

7.8 Understanding the Welsh Government's policy approach for youth unemployment

7.9 Looking abroad for possible solutions

7. Research questions and knowledge gaps

This final chapter centres on feedback from decision-makers and influencers. They were asked to consider what research questions they would like explored to inform their work, and to highlight any other knowledge gaps they believed existed in better understanding what could be done to support young people's employment opportunities related to the pandemic's impact.

7.1 Build on what is already working

From time to time, decision-makers and influencers commented that there was sufficient **existing evidence and learning** from recent recessions, policy interventions and emerging data that could be used to help inform policy in this area. In addition to these learnings, regular data provision, senior level briefings and analyses and ongoing work meant that for some, the situation seemed fairly clear. An example was given of working with the Institute for Employment Studies⁶⁴ on the impacts in this area and where programmes should be directed. It was broadly known what was happening in the labour market and it was more important to work on providing evidence on the effectiveness of policies and interventions and seeing how they could be enhanced to be even more effective. However, the added complexities of coronavirus were also acknowledged, for example the medical dimension and impact on health and wellbeing compared with previous recessions.

There's often a clamour when people first get involved in this and they say we must get up-to-date numbers, tell us in detail what's happening to which people. I don't think we need that. What's much more important is that we need evidence on what's effective. . . . This is an area in which there's been an awful lot of work done, so I think they shouldn't be looking to find something that no one else has thought of. (Influencer)

7.2 Mental health and wellbeing

Some decision-makers and influencers thought more needed to be done to better understand the impact of employment changes on young people's mental health and wellbeing, including the **long term scarring effects**. In one example, a decision-maker wanted to better understand how it interacted with specific transition points such as from schooling to employment. Another was interested to know about how resilient young people were likely to be in the face of these challenges and what could be done to support those less likely to have support networks in place to be more resilient and to be able to explore new opportunities.

We've got good evidence on the mental health and wellbeing impacts for young people in the, let's say, 5-16 age category. What I'm less confident about is how the mental health and wellbeing issues interact with the transition from schooling to employment, further education, or higher education. I think it's in that space I'd be particularly interested in getting some information. (Decision-maker)

⁶⁴ See <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/>

I think it's about understanding what we can do from a policy perspective to build that resilience. And that, I think, is a thing that we don't concentrate on very much. (Decision-maker)

A request was made by one national decision-maker for information on any **positive consequences of the pandemic** on employment and what this could mean for young people that could inform policy. For example, many people who were furloughed reportedly decided to set up their own business which gave them the confidence to address other aspects of their life and wellbeing. Being able to see the benefit of developing resilience, as well as the impact of a lack of resilience, would mean the decision-maker would be more likely to invest in it.

I think we would know then where to invest money [with that information]. . . . It might be actually that we also need to invest in coping skills for young people, and the sort of social skills for young people as well. So there's a recognition that there does need to be quite a bit of money invested in social skills, in resilient skills, in mental wellbeing skills. Because without that as a foundation you can set up all the training courses and jobs but, you know, you set them up to fail then. (Decision-maker)

It was anticipated that **meta studies** would be required because of the pace of change with the pandemic. There was not time to wait for original research to be carried out, felt one decision-maker. The benefit of meta studies on mental health and wellbeing for this participant would be helping to bring clarity for policy decision-making given that differing views and priorities could be provided by different influencers on a range of perspectives. Each would have a different starting point for their perspective depending on their role. The data currently available provided different pictures, possibly via different biases of approach to data gathering.

There was also a suggestion that depth of understanding seemed to be lacking on this topic for young people. There was a fear of not being fully aware of the extent of the risk to young people for this decision-maker - wellbeing challenges might not have to be clinically severe to be significant. This decision-maker also felt that there was much to be gained from gathering **ethnographic-type insight from practitioners** on the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health and wellbeing rather than relying on modelling and data such as hospital admissions and capacity for intervention development. People working 'on the ground' were more likely to see the impact in action and should be empowered to deliver this insight. The call for more in-depth understanding versus the high-level, quantitative data currently available for Wales was echoed by a couple of other participants.

I have more faith in [practitioner experiences] than I do in the modelling or the capacity utilisation, because then loads of things come into even the modelling of capacity utilisation. People underreport capacity and they overreport demand because they want to build slack into the system. (Decision-maker)

A further example from a decision-maker was given of needing to better understand the impact, especially on young people, of **working from home**. Impact areas of interest were financial, personal development and mental health and wellbeing especially for young people at the start of their careers. Influencers on occasion highlighted additional topics of interest related to this knowledge gap as well. They surmised how young people might be more likely to be living in shared accommodation or with limited space and with no risk assessment carried out. Young people might also be more affected by a lack of social interaction with work colleagues, miss out on the ability to build supportive networks in the workplace; and be affected by the rise of digital monitoring by employers.

How many workers in Wales currently are able to financially continue working from home? Because there's been no analysis of that either. . . . This is what I mean in terms of the risk assessments – there hasn't been any real consideration given to the fact that if you do not physically have space where you're living, how does that work? (Influencer)

One related area that could be better understood was to explore the **role of civil society organisations** and how they worked with government to tackle youth unemployment and mental health, stated an influencer. Lessons could be learned from places like Quebec, Canada where the government provided core funding for civil society to pursue their aims. It had reportedly resulted in a much more united front in terms of civil society. It encouraged organisations to work together rather than in competition for scarce project funding, as was thought to be the case in Wales.

7.3 Identifying focused information needs on which to act



It would be valuable to take an **intersectional approach** to the challenges for young people in Wales, explained some decision-makers and influencers: which individual characteristics including protected characteristics were most likely to place young people at risk (e.g. special educational needs), what characteristics of place (e.g. deprived communities) and where inequality had widened most significantly. The ideal for one influencer would be to have a dataset that would

have all the protected characteristics according to whatever theme was being investigated. It was expected to be invaluable to anyone working on changing policy and planning for what they wanted to deliver in the future.

We'd be looking at particularly the intersectionality of those risk factors for those types of young people. . . . Then I would do some ethnographic study for those groups of individuals in those places. (Decision-maker)

There's always going to be a gap in data. Particularly, useable data that is at a Wales level but takes into account different protected characteristics. So you will typically

have data around ethnicity, around gender, around age, around disability. But none of it interrelates. So that's my key bugbear. (Influencer)

To make informed decisions, it would be important to understand what the situation was **before the pandemic** for disadvantaged populations compared with a year on, so that the impact of the coronavirus could be fully comprehended. This information would help to facilitate more focused support and interventions for young people and their dependents, according to an influencer.

There was also concern voiced by an influencer about the impact of **disrupted education on 15-17 year olds** living in lower income households and what their prospects looked like given the damage that may have been done to their skills and employment opportunities. Similarly, from an employer and young person perspective, a decision-maker was keen to understand what the impact had been of **disruption on apprenticeships** and potential subsequent employment, so that the local authority could explore how it could help.

Additionally, **hidden poverty** was one area where more understanding would be beneficial for influencers and decision-makers, on occasion. An example of interest was to look at young people on zero-hour contracts who were classed as self-employed. Another area was to have a better grasp of the proportion of 18-24 year olds who were furloughed but no longer being paid because of the nature of their casual contract. Also, work was likely needed to better understand how to support parents with **increased debt** that they were struggling to repay, according to another influencer.

We do feel that there's quite a lot of hidden 18-24 year olds, . . . they might be on furlough but they're not receiving any salary on furlough because of their contractual situation. And they're not on Universal Credit, and probably they're living at home with mum and dad, or they're sofa surfing. Again, we can't put our finger on that. (Decision-maker)

For a couple of decision-makers, a key area they needed to better understand was **how to reach the most disadvantaged** and disengaged young people for whom support was already available. Prior to the pandemic, engagement officers were able to visit likely areas and seek out these young people but this had not been possible for nearly a year. The knowledge gap was a lack of concrete information on how many young people were being missed and what could be done to reach them. Knowing more about this cohort would also help with planning services and capacity, for example in relation to mental health.

7.4 Understanding what the labour market would look like for young people

For some influencers and occasionally decision-makers, it was important to understand how the labour market would look for young people in the future and the impact any changes might have on their life chances. There were references to wanting to know whether there would be a need to encourage more entrepreneurship; and whether alternatives were being planned given the increases in automation and online offers in sectors that traditionally employed large numbers of young people. More detailed thinking and planning was thought

to be required by one influencer to support young people who would be entering the labour market in the near future.

Post-pandemic what does that look like other than telling me that you are going to create a circular economy, we're going to be supporting Welsh businesses to have their head offices in Wales, and somehow that is going to be the answer to everything. That's not going to change bad contracts. That's not going to change people's lives and reduce the scarring of this recession. (Influencer)

A clearer idea of sectors where **growth** was expected and where **the Welsh Government would focus its efforts** was believed by some influencers and occasionally decision-makers to be needed well in advance so that the necessary **training** and **skills** development programmes could be put in place to meet those needs. Building evidence on the value of the FE sector to put the case for more investment versus HE, aligned with anticipated sector needs, was expected by a couple of influencers to be key. It was deemed important to better understand how exactly young people would be supported into sectors where infrastructure investments could be made to create job opportunities. Was it about investing in green sectors or more about greening the economy across all sectors, where opportunities could lie for young people?

According to one influencer, however, caution would be required when targeting specific emerging sectors like climate related jobs and retrofitting for energy efficiency. While there were opportunities available, they were not thought to be on a very large scale relative to the number of people willing to work. It was also considered **risky to attempt to exert control over the economy** on a sector basis. Current stable and even large, potentially declining sectors still reportedly presented greater opportunity for job creation than green energy for example. In addition, such sectors were occasionally highlighted as being quite 'agile' in that they could reopen very quickly, unlike some others types of business. A knowledge gap remained, therefore, regarding **how the more traditional sectors for young people would fare** as lockdown eased.

There's the real danger of hubris about supposing that we have levers over the economy that we don't actually have. I think climate is a really important issue and we will decarbonise, but the idea that there are lots of jobs in these sectors is mistaken. (Influencer)

Some wanted to know how extensive the **anticipated pent-up demand in certain sectors of the labour market** (e.g. hospitality, tourism and leisure) was likely to be; and how volatile those sectors could still be for young people. Furlough had effectively slowed down the flow of workers entering and leaving these sectors which was also affecting young people's prospects. Understanding this dynamic and the potential for pent-up demand could then provide evidence for further intervention development.

I think there is space for us to do a bit more of, 'So, what is going to happen when some of those sectors reopen?'. How many of those jobs are coming back, if those jobs are not coming back, what's happening to those young people, where are they

going? What are they doing? I think there's a big piece of work to do around that. . . . The implications then linking poverty and health. (Influencer)

At a regional level, a decision-maker was finding it difficult to know **how to attract non-traditional employers to the region** and would welcome support in this area. The example was given of the range of skilled young people who applied for a creative role at the organisation, indicating that the creative sector was not well represented in the region. These were thought to be young people who had returned to the region because of the pandemic and had continued to look for work. The decision-maker wanted to better understand how to make use of this new talent pool and facilitate opportunities so these young people could contribute to the regional economy.

Two additional needs occasionally highlighted among influencers were to better understand to what extent:

- Older people with employment experience would now be competing with young people for entry level jobs, and its likely impact on young people's opportunities;
- There was the right infrastructure in place to support young people in employment, like good quality, affordable public transport and affordable housing.

7.5 The impact of employment challenges on dependent children of young people

This subject was expected to be an issue but one that needed to be better understood if interventions were to be developed to support young people in these situations. Some young people (as well as adults of all ages) who were in **precarious employment could not afford not to work** and were therefore thought to be making choices that could potentially expose their household to COVID-19, some decision-makers and influencers felt. This was an area that could be explored further. One decision-maker was keen to see qualitative work followed by quantitative research to help inform policy in this area. There would also have been young people who became first-time parents during the pandemic and would have missed out on a range of support because of the COVID-19 containment measures in place. Insight on this cohort would be beneficial as well, anticipated another decision-maker.

Getting a sense of those issues would be good. Again, I would value some ethnographic work because I think some of these things are going to be very small in number, or nuanced in effect. You need to do that ground work before you can construct effective survey instruments. (Decision-maker)

[Regarding young parents and the impact on dependents], we're probably not identifying it and seeing it at a statutory level – the impact of that and the impact it has on their health and wellbeing. (Decision-maker)

Additionally, reference was made to a reported rise in child protection rates during the pandemic and how this issue needed to be better understood as well. It was described as an 'unknown picture' by an influencer. A further knowledge gap raised by a decision-maker was the extent to which the **childcare sector had been affected by the pandemic**; and how keen parents would be to use the service because of coronavirus fears. This included gaps in

knowledge regarding what the impact had been on more informal types of childcare like after-school support.

7.6 Wales versus UK-level data

From time to time, decision-makers and influencers stated that in general there was not enough **robust Wales-level data** on young people and the impact of unemployment. This could include having a better picture of which young people were on furlough, what proportion had moved from tourism and hospitality into other sectors; the reasons for young people being unemployed pre-pandemic versus post-pandemic; and what could be done to ensure a generation 'does not go missing' and to help them (back) into work. According to one regional decision-maker, their current approach to trying to understand the furlough landscape for young people in the local authority was difficult because of limited data. Their youth services could be more effectively deployed if better data was available. Capturing **young people's perspectives** would be important as well to ensure a holistic picture was gained. A further information need for one decision-maker was data highlighting the impact of Kickstart in Wales.



We're assuming that there's a very high group of young people who've fallen out of tourism and hospitality, and that's all based on we know that there's a high impact in furlough, on that sector in [this authority]. But we don't know, if we focus on an intervention, is that best use of our resources to focus it on people who might have fallen out of tourism and hospitality? Whereas in fact they might have gone into other entry level jobs. . . . We've got no data to bottom that out. (Decision-maker)

It was also stated by a decision-maker that there was a lack of Wales-level data in the areas that related to **fair work**, such as on minimum wage compliance that would help to inform policy. Data could lack robustness at this level and was not available from UK authorities which worked on a UK footprint. However, as with some other participants, it was stressed that more **qualitative** data was also essential on individuals' experiences, to help add meaning to quantitative data.

Useful Wales-level data on young people could include having evidence of the extent of negativity towards **zero-hours contracts** and the extent of the impact on young people working to those types of contract. This decision-maker assumed that the gig economy was unpopular among those who worked in it but felt decision-making would benefit from seeing evidence of perceptions and impact. It could, for example, impact on how the organisation procured services.

7.7 What young people want

Building on earlier comments in this chapter, it was noted on occasion by decision-makers and influencers that it would be helpful to have a better understanding of what young people wanted or needed regarding work opportunities and to help them join or re-join the labour market. It was a theme that also emerged among third sector organisations. The need was raised by one decision-maker in relation to the process of aligning employers signing up to the Kickstart scheme with young people eligible for the support. Speaking with young people and local support staff would be necessary. It was important to be guided by the principle of what was right for the young person, advised an influencer, and how young people needed to be equipped to deal with a likely changing employment landscape. It could be, for example, that support with housing was a better investment than attempting to tackle the issue of zero-hour contracts; but more evidence would be required on the subject.

What we want to do is embed young people as a key stakeholder in shaping the future. We want to empower them really to have a voice, you know, to have a say and to influence decisions and to influence policy. (Third sector)

How best to truly engage with young people, especially those least likely to engage with an intervention, so their voice could be heard when designing interventions was a knowledge gap highlighted by one regional decision-maker. They carried out consultations but felt that it was probably the same people responding and doubted that young people they needed to hear from necessarily engaged with them. It felt as though, to an extent, the organisation was making too many assumptions about what young people thought and what they needed. In contrast, some third sector organisations were adapting and using platforms such as WhatsApp to engage with young people. They were conscious of making the language used as accessible as possible to encourage engagement with a broader range of young people.

One decision-maker was concerned about the **impact parents might be having** on young people who were living at home. The balance of influence was expected to have shifted from education and training institutions, careers advisers and peers towards family members who might not be best placed to advise their children. This decision-maker stated that if this dynamic was better understood, they would explore how best to educate parents more effectively on the subject.

7.8 Understanding the Welsh Government's policy approach for youth unemployment

A request was made by an influencer for a better understanding of whether there was devolved variation in policy approaches to youth unemployment that challenged the idea of the liberal UK welfare regime. The latter was reported to have produced flexibility in the job market and precarity, especially for young people, with commercial contracts replacing other types of contract.

Considering a more structural approach to youth unemployment was reportedly beneficial, rather than it being an individual at fault; or solely their responsibility. It involved tackling

youth unemployment as if it were a structural problem linked with other things like poverty, economics, geography, background, education and mental health which were also caused by structural issues. There was believed by this participant to be a need for more empirical research in this area.

7.9 Looking abroad for possible solutions

As highlighted in 5.8, exploring the approaches other nations took could provide valuable learning. Further work could be done to gauge the approach in **Denmark** because of its lower rates of youth unemployment. Lessons could also be learned from Scotland.

The **relationship between government and civil society organisations** in other nations in addressing youth unemployment could be explored further suggested one influencer, to assess what difference such approaches could make in Wales.

8. Conclusion

Overall, there was widespread agreement about the importance and nature of challenges; and that these were complex and multi-dimensional issues. In addition to the challenge in gaining, retaining and partaking in good, fair work, issues raised included the effects of the temporary lockdown, such as home-schooling, or pre-existing issues such as the nature of employment for young people, Brexit and challenges accessing universal credit.

Whereas several interventions are perceived by decision-makers and influencers to be available, apart from the furlough scheme, young people in this study did not, on the whole, appear familiar with them or accessing the support. Although there were different views as to what the solutions and outstanding research questions may be, a strong theme emerged to build on what is already in place and to ensure young people are involved in the development of support.

