

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR 16 – 19 YEAR OLDS

Qualitative research into the views of parents

National Family and Parenting Institute

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A. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

1. **Research background**

A wide-ranging government review of the system of financial support for 16-19 year olds is underway, with the aim of ensuring that young people are able to participate fully in education and training. The initial report of this review, *Supporting young people to achieve* (2004), set out the government's long-term vision of a single system of financial support for 16-19 year olds. It also launched a public consultation on a series of questions to inform development of these proposed reforms.

Government wishes to involve the parents of young people in this process, and is proposing a programme of consultation with them on the questions raised in the document. Qualitative research was commissioned as part of this programme of consultation.

2. **Objectives**

The aims of this research were broadly twofold...

- to provide an opportunity for parents of young people to engage with the review issues by responding in detail to the long-term questions set out in the document; these are...
 - which activities should be eligible for support in addition to education and training
 - should there be any time limits for support for these other activities
 - how could the government recognise de facto independence without encouraging young people to leave the family home
 - are there any other circumstances in which a young person should be recognised as independent
 - how should the proposed threshold on young people's income operate

- would an income threshold define full-time work, or would an hours rule be more appropriate
- which streams of financial support should be included in any single system of support specifically for 16-19 year olds, and which should be left outside
- to include the views of a cross section of parents from different cultures and areas

B. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

1. **Methodology**

The fieldwork for this research consisted of five 90-minute group discussions with parents of young people.

It was decided to widen the age criteria to include parents of children aged 15-20 years, in order to capture the views of those whose children were about to make the choice of what to do on reaching 16, as well as the experiences of those whose children had recently completed this period of their lives. Within this, sample variables included:

- young people's status – in full-time or part-time education; vocational training; employment; not participating in any such study (unemployed or working)
- young people's age and gender – a spread of ages between 15 and 20 years old, and a mix of sons and daughters
- parents' employment status – one or two unemployed in each group, with about half unemployed in the group in Leeds (area of high unemployment)
- living arrangements – the large majority of children were still living at home with their parents; five were living independently
- a range of locations – North urban; South urban; Midlands urban; London; South Wales rural
- unemployment levels – one low (Poole) and one high (Leeds)
- cultural variation – Caucasian; African-Caribbean; Asian
- gender – mothers and fathers
- socio-economic grouping – a mix within C2DE classes

These variables were inevitably compressed within the five group discussions.

After consultation with HM Treasury, stimulus material was created to aid discussion. This took the form of...

- boards, which explained the aims of the review and examples to illustrate the specific questions (see appendix)
- paragraphs explaining the issues in greater depth, which were incorporated in the discussion guide (see appendix)

Fieldwork took place at the end of August 2004. The groups were conducted by Catherine Taylor, Ben Toombs and Jag Poonia. The project was managed by Clem Henricson

2. **Sample summary**

The five group discussions were recruited as follows...

- Group 1: parents of 15-20 year olds; North urban area with high unemployment; predominantly white British; C2DE
- Group 2: parents of 15-20 year olds; South urban area with low unemployment; predominantly white British; C2DE
- Group 3: parents of 15-20 year olds; Midlands urban area; Asian (Indian); C2DE
- Group 4: parents of 15-20 year olds; London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE
- Group 5: parents of 15-20 year olds; Wales rural area; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Three of the groups consisted of eight respondents, one of nine. Group 1, which experienced last-minute recruitment difficulties, consisted of six respondents. In each group, there was a mix of respondents with children in the following categories...

- full time education – school or college, academic or vocational course
- work-based training/apprenticeship – placed with an employer while on the course, maybe full time, maybe part time and at school or college part time

- unemployed and not doing any training/education
- employed and not doing any training/education

C. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Contextual points and general opinions of the review

1. Understanding of the current system of financial support for young people was limited, and very few respondents knew enough about it to be able to compare what they received with what families in different situations were entitled to. The issues covered in the course of these discussions were complex, both in concept and in detail, and most found it difficult (at least initially) to appreciate the implications for the support they and their children currently received. Even more difficult to understand were the effects the proposals would have on families in situations which differed from their own, and concepts which required empathy or comparison with these situations. The effects of this limited comprehension were felt throughout the research and, despite efforts to explain and illustrate with examples, are often reflected in the nature of these findings.
2. There was little to suggest that parents or young people base decisions about what course of learning to pursue after the age of 16 on financial grounds, or even that the amount of support or income involved is frequently a major consideration. Few parents were able to compare the levels of support available for different types of learning, and most were adamant in any case that by the age of 16 such decisions should be made by young people themselves, and that parents should support that decision or at least acquiesce in it. This research, therefore, did not produce much evidence that levels of financial support are putting pressure on young people to choose one form of learning over another.
3. The current system of support was thought to influence the decisions of some young people who did not wish to continue in full-time education after the age of 16, however. Respondents perceived a lack of attractive opportunities for these young people, and felt that they were either being pressured into taking low-paid employment or were being provided with little short-term incentive to do anything at all. Most understood the purpose of the review to be to remove current anomalies in the support system, and applauded the principle for a number of reasons. First, full-time study was thought unsuitable for many young people, who needed to be encouraged to take up other forms of learning post-16. Second, the UK was thought to be

experiencing a skills shortage because not enough young people are taking up work-based training (although it should be noted that financial support is probably not the only issue here – respondents reported a lack of opportunity for those who wished to take up work-based training, and felt that not enough employers were offering such training). Third, the ability to take up an alternative activity (not study or work-based training) for a while would give young people more time to decide what to do with the years ahead, instead of being pressured into a binding decision immediately after leaving school. Fourth, such alternative activities were expected to have educational benefits of their own. Fifth, they would help to ‘keep kids off the street’.

Activities

“Which activities should be eligible for support in addition to education and training?”

4. Unprompted suggestions for suitable alternative activities were often hard to elicit, but eventually fell into two categories: those which related to specific skills and complemented mainstream education; and those which went beyond what was taught in schools and colleges. In both categories there was a clearly discernable benefit to society. The greatest unprompted emphasis was placed on the second category, which included volunteering.
5. Respondents were then shown the following set of proposed activities:

SUGGESTIONS OF APPROVED ACTIVITIES	
1. Activities to develop learning and skills	2. Activities to help remove barriers to working and learning
Volunteering	Finding accommodation if homeless
Informal learning	Sessions with a child psychologist to overcome personal problems
Periods when the young person is waiting for a course to begin (e.g. if they have switched courses)	Behavioural skills course for young offenders
Combining part-time learning with other responsibilities, e.g. parenting, caring, employment	

Most agreed that the first set of activities was sensible and appropriate, although volunteering was the only suggestion to generate much detailed discussion. Support for the second set, however, was less widespread, and many felt that young people in these situations were either catered for already by charities and NGOs or were less deserving of taxpayers' money. A minority took a more liberal stance and argued that anything that could be done to help young people facing such difficulties would be worthwhile.

6. Almost all respondents assumed that the support being discussed would take the form of identifiable sums of money paid to parents or their children. Most thought the money should go directly to the young people: as it was their decision to pursue an activity, they should be the ones incentivised. Paying the parents was thought unlikely to be persuasive. The suggestion that support might come through the benefits system in the form of family support, rather than as a ring-fenced payment direct to young people, often generated disappointment but could be seen as more realistic and less prone to abuse by young people making fraudulent claims.
7. The eligibility of an activity for support should, in the view of these respondents, be defined after a flexible and individual consultation process, rather than from a rigid, preset list of options; although some guidelines were expected to be useful. The activity should be judged according to the benefits it would have for the young person and society; this would entail a one-to-one negotiation with an advisor, and a decision made on an individual basis. As parents, most of these respondents did not want to play a formal role in this negotiation, and there was little agreement on the most appropriate type of advisor, but almost all agreed that any decision reached should be guaranteed by contract.

“Should there be any time limits for support for these other activities?”

8. Opinions about the time limit for any such activity also varied: those who saw it as a structured alternative to mainstream education argued for six to 12 months; others who saw it as an opportunity to take time over decisions for the future argued for a longer time limit.

Independence

9. The concept of independence as a definition of eligibility for direct financial support was very difficult for respondents to comprehend, largely because for them the word 'independence' implied a much more diverse set of criteria than that intended in this case. Also, a straight definition of 'financial independence' was only one of the factors they took into account when considering whether support should go directly to young people or their parents. Their views on an appropriate definition therefore tended to be unfocused and non-committal (because the concept of financial independence seemed unrealistic and often irrelevant) and a little dismissive (because they felt this was not necessarily the most important issue to be discussed).

"How could the government recognise de facto independence without encouraging young people to leave the family home?"

10. Although respondents were sympathetic towards young people who were forced to leave home because of abuse or other circumstances, and felt they should receive help as fast as possible, few argued for retrospective checks on eligibility for support. The risk of abuse by young people fraudulently claiming in the knowledge that their details would not be checked immediately was thought too great, and a range of consequences of this was imagined. Most felt that the checks themselves should be as rigorous and efficient as possible and should be applied universally, rather than on a random sample. Many were unhappy with the suggestion of relying on third party confirmation of the situation (such as youth workers or Connexions) – they wanted an expert (such as Social Services) to assess young people's circumstances independently.

"Are there any other circumstances in which a young person should be recognised as independent?"

11. Of the examples of definitions of independence presented to them, respondents felt that 'young people who are parents or married but are still living with their parents' and 'young people who live away from home because of their course of study' should be eligible to receive government support directly (rather than via parents). The rationale for this was not so much that they were seen as 'independent' (as noted, a

confusing term), as that they were 'adult'. The fourth example, young people who live at home but do not receive any support, did not meet with approval, partly because this situation was hard to imagine, but also because nothing about it suggested adulthood.

“How should the proposed threshold on young people’s income operate – would an income threshold define full-time work, or would an hours rule be more appropriate?”

12. Initial reactions to the question of whether a threshold on young people’s support should be defined by hours or income reflected a lack of understanding of the current system and the disparity between full-time education and work-based training. Concerns were about the level at which such a threshold should be set to avoid discouraging young people from working part-time in addition to their study or training. Little consensus emerged as to whether this should be measured by hours or income.

Streams of support

“Which streams of financial support should be included in any single system of support specifically for 16-19 year olds, and which should be left outside?”

13. Likewise, opinions were divided over which streams of support should be combined and which kept separate. In this case, as with the definition of income thresholds, many respondents did not feel qualified to answer fully and tended to consider themselves too far removed from the issue to hold a useful opinion.

D. MAIN FINDINGS

1. **Perceptions of the current system of support**

The majority of parents interviewed in this research seemed to have limited awareness of how the current system of support for young people operates. Their knowledge, perhaps unsurprisingly, tended to centre on aspects of the system which were relevant to the situations their own children had experienced; understanding of any wider aspects, which might allow them to make comparisons with other situations, was rare. As a consequence, their comments tended to be fairly one dimensional: any praise or complaint was made on the basis of comparisons with how much support they thought their children *should* receive, rather than belief or knowledge that their children would more or less entitled to support if they were doing something different.

Parents of children continuing in full-time education generally had few complaints about the current system. Many were eligible for and had children who received the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), and were appreciative of this support. There was also some recognition among these parents that they did well out of the current system of support, and that having children in full-time education entailed benefits beyond the EMA.

“We worked out that with child benefit and everything we get about £40 a week for Emma. We’d lose that if she got a job, and at the end of the day there’s no way she would be able to pay us back what we’d lose for her. She wouldn’t be able to pay £40 a week board.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Where complaints arose, they tended to stem from the Allowance’s dependence on household income (which meant that some respondents were not eligible but felt they should be), and the fact that the support was believed to be available only during term time.

“It’s based on parent’s income, which at the end of the day is wrong because the EMA should go to each kid. It shouldn’t matter what the parents get.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“They only get it in term time...she’s having now to look for a job [in the summer holiday] because we can’t afford to buy her everything that she wants.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Greater concerns arose among parents of children who had recently left full-time education. The change in the support that they received had alerted them to what they had enjoyed (and possibly taken for granted) before, and highlighted the benefits of having a child who studies full-time.

“As soon as they finish full-time education, whatever money you’ve got coming in, you lose.”

“And that doesn’t just go for family allowance, that goes for income support and everything.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“We used to have family credit, but that stopped once he started work, and the child benefit stopped as well. It made quite a big difference.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“I can’t get it unless mine is in full-time education.”

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

Parents of children in work-based training had more to complain about. A number felt that the support available to them and their children was insufficient, and that part-time work alongside training was the only alternative. This was seen as both impractical and unrewarding.

“When they’re at tech, they don’t get no financial support. They’re in full-time tech and they’re expected to go out and work. How can they do that? I don’t see how they can.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

The perceived lack of support from the government was compounded in the eyes of many by low or non-existent wages for trainees. Although not within the remit of this research, the issues of a minimum wage for 16 – 17 year olds and incentives for employers to pay decent training wages arose and elicited strong feelings.

“The minimum wage doesn’t apply until you’ve been trained. It’s a loophole the government uses.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Concerns about the situation faced by young people in work-based training, and those who wanted to embark on it, went beyond financial support. There was general dissatisfaction with experience of college courses offering this type of training, and a belief that there are not enough opportunities to ‘learn on the job’.

“I think they should go back to the old-fashioned apprenticeships. These college courses are rubbish. They should be promoting apprenticeships and giving employers money to take on employees and train them on the job.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“How do they expect to train children if they’re not willing to take them on anyway? It’s a vicious circle.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

More generally, comments were made about the perceived complexity of the current support system and difficulties respondents had had in accessing information or advice. Feelings on this subject may have been influenced by opinions of the wider benefits system, but a number of complaints were made in this context.

“The information you get is such jargon, you can’t understand half of it.”

“It’s all complicated and long and drawn out. You go through an awful lot of things to be told at the end of the day: ‘Oh, I’m sorry, you don’t qualify for that.’”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

“The worst thing I’ve found is that it tends to be fairly complicated in the first place, and then if you do what you have to do – you deal with all the bits of paper and take them in – then when you go back they give you different information from what the first person gave you.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Despite these complaints, however, there was little evidence that parents really compared the financial advantages and disadvantages between one type of learning and another. As noted, few had much knowledge of what was available in situations other than their own, and few had ever tried to work out how much they might get if their children were engaged in different activities. Consequently, there was little to suggest that decisions about young people’s education or training were made on this basis. Indeed, respondents in all groups said that this decision was not even theirs to make: they felt their children should choose which path of education or employment to pursue, and that such financial considerations were secondary.

“I don’t think it makes any difference what we want them to do. They do what they want to do. At the end of the day, you can’t run their lives for them. When they get to a certain age, they’ve got to run their own lives.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

2. Reactions to the prospect of a review

2.1 Overall impressions

Respondents' initial understanding of how the support system might be restructured was typically hazy. Their lack of appreciation of the current system, and the complexity of the issues on which they were being asked to comment, on both a general and specific level, often made it difficult for them to express an opinion. However, over the course of the discussions, some general thoughts about the proposed reforms emerged.

The majority felt that the purpose of the review was to encourage young people to remain in some form of education beyond the age of 16 by creating more attractive opportunities for those who did not wish to continue to study full time. At the moment, it was thought, these young people were being forced into low-paid work or provided with little incentive or motivation to pursue any structured activity. On this understanding, the review was warmly received by most.

"You've got to go to college full time, or you've got to get off your backside and get a job."

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

"I think they should be made to do something, not just sit at home."

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

"We've got to give our young people a chance if we want to keep them in education or in training schemes."

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

"You need youngsters to recognise that they need to be proactive. You have to say: 'If you don't do this, you are not going to get that.' You can't make it easy for them."

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

"It's got to be a good thing that they're thinking about bringing in these allowances, because any help is better than nothing."

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

"It's good they're concentrating on these issues."

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

The proposal that work-based training should be supported to a similar degree as full-time education was applauded, both because full-time study was clearly unsuitable for many young people and because the

UK was thought to be experiencing a skills shortage in the industries which might offer work-based training.

“It depends on the child – you can’t just say full-time education because some of them don’t do that.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“More work placements, actually learning a trade... We have a skills shortage. Why aren’t we doing practical things?”

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

Giving young people the opportunity to take their time over deciding what to do with the years ahead was also thought important. At the moment, many respondents felt that young people were being pressured to choose a career or restrictive education path at around 16 because of the limited number of financially viable options (primarily study, training or employment). A system which would allow them to undertake a short-term, structured activity at or after 16 was expected to address this to some degree (see also below).

For some, the educational opportunities presented by such activities were also appealing. They felt that through them young people could acquire skills and responsibilities which would serve them well in later life, and which were less easy to come by in mainstream education and employment.

“The education system doesn’t teach them life skills, not today. It’s all bookwork.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

“If they’re going out and talking to people, that’s all part of learning isn’t it? Learning about life.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

These positive views about widening the options for young people by increasing the number of activities for which financial support might be available were held by almost all respondents. Some, however, felt that the issue went beyond financial support, and that motivation, from parents, schools and the government, was at least as important. They argued that financial incentives alone would be insufficient to persuade young people to take up work-based training or other activities. This thought reflected the widespread feeling that young people will do what they want to do, and that money (especially if it does not go directly to them) is often not a primary factor in their decision.

“All the trades are now short because more respect is given to being an accountant, a doctor, a professional, than being a tradesperson, a carpenter, a plumber. It is about motivating a child to go into that profession.”

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

“Basic skills, the motivation to go out there and learn, it isn't the government's job to do that. It is mum and dad.”

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

2.2 Regional and ethnic variations

The sample included respondents from areas of high and low employment, and of white, African-Caribbean and Indian ethnicity. Differences in opinion and attitude between these variables were not often apparent or significant, perhaps partly because of the difficulty many respondents (from all groups) had in fully engaging with these topics. Where variations did arise with regard to specific issues, they are noted as relevant; some more general observations can be made at this point as well. It should be noted, however, that the size of the sample does not permit a confident allocation of attitudes to ethnicity and level of employment; numerous other factors (each group was held in a different region, for example) may have been involved as well.

Parents in areas of low employment appeared to be particularly keen to move young people into jobs, and to do so more quickly than those in other areas. They could appreciate the benefits that activities other than mainstream education and training might bring, but believed that these should be viewed as short-term options whose ultimate objective was to help prepare young people for employment.

Respondents from areas of higher employment were perhaps more open to the idea that supported activities could allow young people to take a step back and not rush into (or be pressured into) employment choices they might later regret. On the other hand, they seemed more suspicious that support for these activities might be abused. Although appreciative of the proposals, they were perhaps especially keen to see measures which would prevent young people from receiving taxpayers' money for doing nothing, or at least nothing constructive.

Those in the African-Caribbean group seemed to place great value on making work-based training as attractive as possible, both as an alternative to full-time education and as a solution to perceived skills

shortages in the building trade, for example. This may, however, have been as much a factor of location – the group was held in London, where such skills shortage may have been particularly apparent.

Indian respondents typically had high expectations for their children and felt removed from options other than mainstream education. They were willing to engage in the discussion from an external viewpoint, but were often slower to see the benefits which might result from these alternatives. What set them apart seemed to be a more conservative attitude to young people's independence – they expected their children to live at home for longer, the family structure to be stronger and more supportive (financially as well as emotionally), and for there to be greater parental influence over children's choices.

3. **Activities to be supported**

3.1 “Which activities should be eligible for support in addition to education and training?”

As with the more general issues, most respondents struggled to come to terms with this question. To begin with, some could not understand why the government would provide financial support for young people who were not in education (many of the views noted above were reached later in the discussion). These respondents were typically parents who expected their children to remain in full-time education or to go into work-based training (this was particularly true of the Indian group); the thought that a selection of less mainstream options might or should be available had not occurred to them.

“I can't get my head around this.”

“I can't see what other activities there would be.”

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

Others found it difficult to get beyond positions of suspicion and concern. They imagined that the government, and therefore the taxpayer, would end up paying young people for doing little or nothing, or that young people would somehow be disadvantaged by dropping off the mainstream ‘conveyor belt’ that led from education to employment.

“I don't think they should just give them money. They should have to do something to earn it.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“If you’re sitting in the garden looking at the fence, I wouldn’t want to pay for that.”

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

After discussion, however, some spontaneous suggestions for suitable activities did arise. Broadly speaking, these fell into two categories: activities which would develop specific skills, and either build on or feed into what was learnt in mainstream education; and activities with less clearly defined benefits which went beyond what was taught in schools and colleges.

Some respondents were initially unable to think beyond the first of these categories. They suggested that support should be available for young people on unpaid work experience, or those who wanted to work for a short period of time, and for little or no wage, in an industry relevant to their course of study. In these cases, a benefit to society would accrue from a more highly skilled young population.

A greater number of respondents, however, made suggestions which fell into the second category; indeed, when those respondents mentioned above considered these suggestions, they often thought them more pressing than their own. By far the most common of these ideas was volunteering (see below). Others included youth leadership, active involvement in sports (ie training) and less clearly defined suggestions which would ‘keep the kids off the streets’. This last was made by respondents in all groups, but was perhaps particularly strongly felt in the area of high unemployment.

In this second category, the benefit to the individual would be experience and learning which went beyond that acquired through formal study. Society would benefit from young people’s greater involvement with worthwhile organisations which would otherwise find recruitment difficult because of their restricted budgets.

“Youth leaders. They all say there’s youngsters hanging about with nothing to do. Scouts, air cadets.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

“It encourages kids, instead of sitting around...Earn some money and do something useful.”

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

“What do kids do when they get bored? They get into trouble. There’s a lot of youngsters out there that want to do things, but they haven’t got the facilities.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the key criterion common to all the above activities was wider benefit: if society (the taxpayer) is to fund activities for young people, then society must also gain from them. Suggestions which lacked this element, such as activities which would merely be entertaining for young people, did not receive much support from other respondents.

Once respondents’ spontaneous suggestions for suitable activities had been exhausted, they were presented with the following proposals:

SUGGESTIONS OF APPROVED ACTIVITIES	
1. Activities to develop learning and skills	2. Activities to help remove barriers to working and learning
Volunteering	Finding accommodation if homeless
Informal learning	Sessions with a child psychologist to overcome personal problems
Periods when the young person is waiting for a course to begin (e.g. if they have switched courses)	Behavioural skills course for young offenders
Combining part-time learning with other responsibilities, e.g. parenting, caring, employment	

Most respondents agreed that the suggestions in the first set, at least, were relevant, sensible and useful.

“It’s good, I’d forgotten about it before. It’s always education, but this recognises that you can go into other things.”

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

As noted, volunteering was frequently suggested spontaneously, and thought to be beneficial to young people as well as those who gain from their work. A range of situations was imagined, supporting the elderly being the most common example.

“They could be helping old people...Give them self-esteem and respect for other people.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

At the moment, it was thought that volunteer work is available, and that some young people have the free time necessary to do it, but that it is an unpopular activity because it is unpaid and involves incidental expenses. Many respondents imagined that support from the government might address this.

"I've known periods when my daughter has been in-between courses and doing absolutely bleeding nothing, so if she'd had the opportunity to earn some money, it might have helped."

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

"It's all very admirable if they want to do some volunteer work, but they've got to get there. The bus fare or your petrol money. If there was an allowance for them, it's got to help."

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Some, however, thought that introducing financial support for volunteering would not be sufficient to make it a popular activity. The attractiveness of different types of volunteering would clearly depend on the work and the motivation of the individual, but some were sceptical about it in principle and felt that others were being overly optimistic.

"I must admit, I can't see any youngster who's got six months to wait before they start a course actually volunteering to do anything."

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

One or two were also concerned that volunteering might not always involve the public good. They imagined that in some cases it could be defined as loose, unstructured work experience, and that a young person could 'volunteer' in a private business if a more formal work placement were not available. In such a situation, not only would the public not benefit, but the young person would be vulnerable to exploitation by the employer, and be seen as cheap, short-term labour.

"If you are talking about giving them money to work for an employer, to sweep up and make tea, then they are not doing anything. I say no. They are paying the child, to get exploited and used."

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

The majority, however, felt that volunteering, if properly defined (see 3.3 below) was a sensible and worthwhile activity to be supported.

The other activities from this first set attracted less discussion, and could be thought confusing or irrelevant by those whose experience was only of mainstream education. On reflection, however, they were generally thought appropriate as well. Informal learning, although unclear to many, was sometimes imagined to be related to specific skills, and thus to be a useful way of spending time. Extending support for students to cover periods between courses was welcomed (especially by those with children in full-time education), although it was not clear whether this support would need to be 'earned' or not. Combining part-time education with parenting, childcare or employment was also approved of, as respondents recognised that such commitments made learning more difficult, both time-wise and (once it was explained to them) financially.

Support for the second set of activities was less widespread. Few respondents felt that these suggestions were relevant to them or their children, and many found it difficult to pass substantial comment. Where discussion did arise, it tended to be about the principle of helping young people, rather than the individual examples given.

Some took a liberal stance, feeling that anything that could be done to help young people facing difficulties to progress in education would be worthwhile.

"It's about the kids who fall through the cracks."

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

Others, perhaps the majority, were unhappy about these suggestions. They tended to feel that provision for young people in these situations was already being made, through charities, NGOs and other bodies. The fact that organisations such as Nacro, Connexions and others are well known implied, for these respondents, that funding is already in place and does not need supplementing with taxpayers' money. More generally, the more conservative tended to feel that these suggestions would be more open to abuse than those in the first set, and that the proposed recipients were less deserving of government money.

"There are agencies and people in place to help the people who are in that situation already. My sister got help – Connexions."

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

Some imagined that young people facing difficulties might not in fact benefit from this stream of support, precisely because of the overlap described above. They felt that eligibility for one would disqualify them from the other.

“The support is already there. If you are already getting support from a certain agency, you are not going to get the support of this new scheme.”

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

Among those who did consider the examples individually, behavioural skills courses for young offenders seemed to generate more dissent than the other two. There was a perception that offenders already benefit from greater resources in general than other young people.

“I’m not being funny, but even when they’ve offended, they all seem to get a lot more than [other young people]. You’ve been on low wages for most of your life, yet these offenders, they can go away on a fortnight’s holiday.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

More specifically, some felt that the activities they had been considering should be seen as an opportunity to stop young people getting into trouble in the first place. As noted, an important (if perhaps secondary) motive for introducing these schemes was felt to be that they would help to ‘keep the kids off the streets’.

“The behavioural course for young offenders. If they put the money into keeping the kids off the streets in the first place, they wouldn’t be there.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

3.2 Funding considerations

The level of funding offered, and who should receive it, was not within the specific remit of this research (except, obliquely, as part of the discussion about independence – see below). Both issues, however, arose in all groups and were often felt to be centrally important to the success of a future system of support for young people. It seems relevant, therefore, to cover respondents’ views at this point.

Many respondents felt that the role of financial support for these activities should be to make them feasible rather than to ‘sell’ them to young people. As noted, they believed that few would volunteer (for example) for the money alone; success would be achieved by making

this possible for those who wanted to do so anyway, by removing incidental financial barriers such as travel expenses and lunch money.

“Time doesn’t cost money but bus fares and everything else costs money.”

“And lunch. What do they do for lunch if they’re out all day? You give them a packed lunch, but how much does that add up to at the end of your week?”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Some were also concerned that, if the level of support were set too high, young people might have little incentive to move on to paid employment.

“I think it could encourage people not to bother getting a job.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

When talking about financial support for these activities, almost all respondents immediately assumed that identifiable, ring-fenced sums of money would be paid to the parent or young person. Unless challenged, there was little or no expectation that support would come through what respondents defined as “the benefits system” – that is, family support in the form of payments such as Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit. As noted, their grasp of the intricacies of which benefits they received and which they might be eligible for if their children were in different situations was limited; the concept of more benefits was not as top of mind as individual, ring-fenced payments. Moreover, their views were informed by awareness of the EMA (which they did not regard as part of the benefits system); it may have seemed logical to some that similar payments might be available for other activities.

“That EMA is her money. It’s nothing to do with us. She gets it for going to college.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Having made this assumption, most respondents felt that the incoming money for ‘alternative’ activities should go directly to their children – an equivalent of the EMA. Many said that they had (and should have) little influence over what their children decided to do after they reached 16. In this situation, it was young people, not their parents, who needed to be incentivised; the prospect of extra money for the family as a whole was thought unlikely to be persuasive.

“I think they’d have to see it as getting the money themselves. Mine especially would say ‘Why should I do it when you’re getting the money?’”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“You won’t get kids volunteering... They’re not going to say they’ve got time to sweep the pavements if you’re not going to pay them. I can’t even get my kids to do something in the house without me paying out.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Paying young people something akin to a wage was also expected to be valuable experience for them. It might make them feel more adult, and teach them to manage money.

“He’s got to take responsibility for his own money. Because he’s got good money, he’s got to pay.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“If they sign for a wage, they’ll feel a bit more adult.”

“Or give them some money and say: ‘That’s got to pay for your bus fares, and if you run out you’ve got to walk.’ They’ll feel that sense of responsibility as well. A bit of finance.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

A few respondents looked at the issue from another angle, and commented that there was no guarantee that young people would receive the money if it did not go directly to them. They imagined that some parents would keep it for themselves.

“Parents will spend the extra money on drink, on themselves, or on going out, on fags. They won’t give it to the children.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Once it was explained that payments might come through family support, rather than as a ring-fenced payment akin to EMA, many respondents initially seemed disappointed, and felt that the scheme would be less successful. On reflection, however, some realised that this was a more realistic, less radical offer, and therefore more likely to be implemented. Some also felt that this arrangement would make the system less open to abuse by young people, an issue which concerned many.

3.3 Defining activities

A strong consensus emerged across the groups on the way in which activities should be defined as eligible for support. Respondents unanimously called for flexibility and individual consultation rather than

strict guidelines. In their view, the appropriateness of an activity should be measured by its outcome (the benefit it promised to the individual and society), not its place on a preset list.

“You’ve got to give them a bit of leeway. You can’t have a strict regime of things they can and can’t do.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“It should be commonsense, depending on the activity, how useful and what it leads to.”

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

There would be little point in young people taking part in activities which were of no benefit to them, which were irrelevant to their eventual ambition, or which they actively disliked.

“It would have to be in the interest of the child. If they want to be a nurse, you don’t send them sweeping roads. So if it’s just that on the list, and not nursing, or not what they want to do in the future, then it’s not worth it.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

They did recognise, however, that a completely open and free system such as this would risk confusion, and that indicative guidelines to give young people an idea of what might be acceptable would be useful. An experienced advisor, who could suggest alternatives if necessary, would also be important.

“They’re not going to know what to do, are they? They need someone who knows what they are talking about and can help them.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

“A specialist unit where the staff are trained to identify the needs of every individual, and have a comprehensive application form so they can sit down with them for half an hour or an hour.”

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

Thoughts about the involvement of parents in these negotiations varied. Many respondents did not want to be involved directly in the discussions, as they believed their children were old enough to make their own decisions (and would not want their parents there, anyway). They did not want their children to feel they were pressuring them.

“If you force your child to do something they don’t want to do, they’re not going to do it.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

"It is about their choices. As a parent, you should be there to guide them if they come to you, but if you start interfering..."

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

"I don't think a child would like their parents behind them at that age. I can't even go shopping with mine. I have to meet them down the road."

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Most of these acknowledged that they would be involved less formally, however, both in advising beforehand and in keeping track of their progress once the activity had begun.

"Every parent will get involved somewhere along the line with what their kids are going into. You might not do it blatantly, but you might get to know the child's employer, for example."

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Indian respondents wanted to be involved more closely than those in the white and African-Caribbean groups. They also called for wider participation, including intermediaries such as teachers who could identify a young person's strengths and weaknesses, to make the negotiation process as informed as possible. This attitude reflected their more conservative views on their children's independence.

There was also some disagreement on the most appropriate person to negotiate with young people. Connexions staff were the most immediate suggestion from many, but a number of respondents reported bad experiences with Connexions in the past which they felt had involved poor advice and misunderstandings. In these cases, schools careers advisers were often preferred.

"My daughter has had a lot to do with Connexions, and they haven't done a lot. They send you a lot of information, but not normally for the jobs you asked for."

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Whatever part parents thought they should play in their children's choices, they agreed that the decisions reached after negotiation should be guaranteed by a contract. This would ensure that young people would 'earn' the support and that their 'employer' could not renege on the arrangement.

"Don't just give the money to the child or parents without having something in black and white."

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

“There would have to be something that says you’ve been and you’ve done it, and you can get paid...You’d have to have done a certain amount of time.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

3.4 “Should there be any time limits for support for these other activities?”

There was little agreement on the length of time for which young people should be allowed to take part in these activities; to some extent, opinions reflected the priorities respondents had for the scheme.

Many of those who saw it as an opportunity to fill otherwise empty periods constructively, or as a structured alternative to mainstream education, felt that the maximum should be relatively short: typically six or 12 months. After this, they argued, young people would have gleaned what they needed from the experience and be ready to move into employment. This view was held particularly strongly in the high-unemployment area.

“They can’t go on like that forever...Personally, I would have thought 12 months from leaving school...They’re not children at that age...Then, obviously, it’s going to be time to get a job, isn’t it? A real job.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Others who recognised an opportunity for young people to take their time over decisions for the future, and perhaps even to experience a range of industries before committing to one, as well as acquiring valuable skills, tended to be less prescriptive. A maximum of a number of years was not too long for some of these respondents.

“These things should eventually lead to a job or some end product – depends how long that would take.”

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

“They might find once they are in there, they don’t really like it. Maybe in a year they have been guided into three or four things, and they really like this.”

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

A few considered the time limit in terms of the age of the young person, rather than a set length of time.

“[You need to draw the line at] 20, 21 at the very most. If they haven’t got a clue what it’s about by then, then forget it – they’re a lost cause.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Most thought that, although a contract should be binding in the short-term, young people should be able to leave before the maximum period ended if they found a job they wanted.

4. **Independence**

4.1 Understanding independence

This was a very difficult issue for most respondents to discuss or comprehend, at least initially. Few had a clear understanding of the current system against which they could evaluate the proposals. Moreover, the idea that independence was something which could be defined by thresholds or a certain set of circumstances was alien to many. For them, it was a much more diverse and emotive concept, involving (for example) age, attitudes, responsibility, circumstances and income. 'Measuring' it in this way seemed to them simplistic and to be missing the point.

A large part of the problem for these respondents seemed to be the use of the word 'independence' to determine whether financial support should go to young people or their parents. They recognised a variety of forms of independence, and thought that young people could often be described as independent in one sense but not another (for example, a married couple living with one set of parents might become a socially independent unit but remain financially dependent). A number felt that many young people do not become fully independent until they are much older – into their 30s – but begin to feel and become independent in some senses from their mid teens onwards.

Even when narrowing the definition to financial independence, many remained confused. They understood financial independence to mean the ability to exist without support from others (although this tended to exclude state support), yet the majority of the examples presented involved young people who still lived with their parents and were therefore (in their eyes) still financially dependent on them. It was only after further discussion and explanation that most respondents were able to express their views on whom support should go to; in doing so, many seemed to discard the term 'independence' in favour of a wider, more practical yardstick.

The factors they took into account when deciding whether young people in different circumstances should receive support directly included some of the issues discussed above. In favour of direct support was the fact that it provided an incentive and the opportunity to learn financial responsibility, as well as the practical argument that young people would be incurring the expenses, so they should get the money to cover them. It was, however, imagined to make the system more open to abuse by young people, who were thought less likely to 'try it on' if they had to receive the money via their parents. To many respondents, these 'softer' considerations seemed more important and relevant than the thresholds and measures with which they were presented.

4.2 "How could the government recognise de facto independence without encouraging young people to leave the family home?"

This question was not thought directly relevant by any of these respondents, as they did not believe that the possibility of fraudulently claiming financial support would make their teenaged children (or the children of anyone they knew) want to leave home. Their views were therefore essentially those of taxpayers rather than parents.

Although most thought that young people who had been forced to leave home because of abuse or other dangers should receive the fastest possible service from those checking their circumstances, few argued for a system whereby independence would be granted and checked retrospectively. Such a system, they believed, would be open to abuse by the majority who had no reason to leave home, even if it benefited the minority who did.

"They shouldn't do that because [young people] will know they can just come and get some."

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

These views were often at least partly influenced by the perception that such abuses already occurred elsewhere in the benefits system.

"How many young girls have you seen get pregnant so they can get a council house? If they couldn't get a council house, would they fall pregnant so easily? If they thought it wasn't going to be dished out to them on a plate, would it happen so easily?"

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Some imagined that the promise of (initially) uncorroborated financial support would make it easier for young people who were not particularly happy at home, but who had no grounds to leave at the moment, to make the decision to leave – a decision they would later come to regret.

“I would want to make up my mind to say: ‘OK, you have a skill, a trade, you’re earning enough money, off you go.’ But not them leaving home just because they can’t get on with their parents.”

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

“I think a lot of them would leave on the Monday and be back home on the Friday. It might encourage them to leave home unnecessarily.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Others thought that some young people would cheat the system even more flagrantly by claiming support without leaving home at all.

“It might encourage a few 17 and 18 year olds to claim it, whether they’d left home or not.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

The consequences of a negative retrospective check (would young people would be liable for the money they had incorrectly received?) were not often considered, but the fact that support might be withdrawn after a couple of months did worry some respondents. They imagined that young people would leave home and set themselves up independently, then be unable to support themselves and be too embarrassed or scared to go back home.

There was widespread sympathy for young people who were forced to leave home because of abuse, but these respondents tended to argue for other solutions to the problem. The offer of temporary free housing and care (but no cash in hand) while checks were being carried out was suggested, and a number believed that organisations offering such a service already existed. This would remove the incentive to cheat the system, and provide the kind of support they thought young people suffering abuse really needed.

“It would be better for 16 and 17 year olds, if they do think they’ve got some sort of problem, to have somewhere to go. Rather than give them money, they should have a centre to go to where they’ve got a bed and are being assessed in the meantime.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Others felt that the issue should be dealt with at its source: the abusive parent should be removed, not the child. Some were dismayed by the possibility that Social Services might not be dealing with this issue themselves.

“Isn’t that what Social Services are supposed to be there for? Because a 16 or 17 year old is not an adult in my eyes. It’s still a child.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

The checks themselves, whenever they were carried out, should be as rigorous as possible in the view of these respondents, and should be conducted for all applicants rather than a random sample.

Many were unhappy with the suggestion of relying on third parties such as youth workers or Connexions to confirm the situation – they wanted an expert to assess young people’s circumstances independently. When told that decisions are currently made by JobCentre staff, many were surprised and dissatisfied, feeling that specialist judgement would be more appropriate in what must be difficult cases.

“You need a social worker, someone qualified in the field. An advice worker is not enough.”

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

4.3 “Are there any other circumstances in which a young person should be recognised as independent?”

Again, this was a difficult question for respondents to come to terms with, partly because it lay outside their own experience, and partly because of the confusion over the definition of independence. For many, it made more sense to base a decision about where support should be directed on whether or not a young person could be described as ‘adult’, rather than ‘independent’. Adulthood seemed to be a much more flexible and inclusive concept than independence, with its various, and often contradictory, definitions.

Young people who are parents or married, but still living at home, were generally considered to be adults by virtue of their responsibilities, ability to make their own decisions, and their social position. The fact that they would be financially dependent on the parents with whom they lived was thought irrelevant when deciding where support should go.

“Young people who are married are separate entities, even if they’re still living at home...If they’re entitled to a benefit, it should go directly to them.”

“The same with young people who are parents themselves. They may not be financially independent, but they are independent entities. They should receive whatever [they are entitled to] direct to them.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

Moreover, household income tended to be seen holistically rather than as being divided between young people and their parents. Few believed that overall household income would be affected by this decision, as they expected that young people living at home who received money from government would make greater contributions to household expenses.

“You can’t claim for a married child because they’re independent with their partner...You can charge them more for living with you.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

In other words, they felt that support should be allocated in recognition of young people’s adulthood, rather than recognition of who in the household pays the bills. Any redistribution of this support within the household should and would be handled privately, not officially.

Some white respondents could not imagine why young people would be married and living with their parents. Others, especially Indian parents, thought it a natural situation – their children did not tend to leave home until older, and their extended family units tended to be stronger and more supportive. Most respondents, however, believed that this situation could occur, even if they thought it irrelevant to themselves.

“If you’re married, you’re independent regardless of where you live.”

Group 3: Midlands urban; Asian (Indian); C2DE

Directing support to young people living away from home because of the location of their course of study also met with general approval. Living away from home could confer its own sense of responsibility and adulthood on young people, as well as lowering parents’ household expenses. Also, on practical grounds, it made sense to most respondents that it would be less convenient for parents to subsidise young people in this situation than those living at home.

“They’re not at home, they’ve got their own bills to pay, and rent and food and everything like that. So you shouldn’t get the money for them.”

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

The last example was more difficult to understand, and many respondents found it hard to believe that parents would refuse to give their children support while they were living at home. If nothing else about these young people’s situations suggested adulthood, the feeling was that supporting them should be a private matter and the responsibility of the parents, not the government.

4.4 “How should the proposed threshold on young people’s income operate – would an income threshold define full-time work, or would an hours rule be more appropriate?”

Of the subsets of respondents’ wider notions of independence, financial independence was generally thought the easiest to define, at least in principle: young people are financially independent if they can support themselves. In these respondents’ eyes, therefore, young people living at home could not be described as independent in this sense. Even those paying board and lodgings were generally regarded as making only token contributions to household expenses.

“I think they’re always dependent on you, until they move on and live on their own. When they are living under your roof, whether they pay you or not, they are still dependent.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

In light of this, the majority had difficulty making constructive comment on how financial ‘independence’ could be defined for the purposes of allocating support. In whatever way the threshold were set, whether on income or hours, it would mean that some young people living at home received money from the government and others did not, even though both groups were dependent on their parents to some degree.

Initial reactions often reflected a lack of understanding of how the current system operates, or awareness of how young people in work-based training are disadvantaged. Views on a threshold were related to the effect it might have on part-time work alongside study, rather than its equal application to training and study.

It was often thought that setting a threshold at which support would cease would be a disincentive to work, or at least to work hard enough to pass the cut-off point. Some also felt that young people in education or training would be unlikely to have the time to earn significant amounts of money or spend long hours at work, and that any threshold would therefore be set low. In particular, those with children who worked part time alongside their study feared that their families would be penalised for their children's minimal income.

"The problem is, you're encouraging them not to work if they think: 'What's the point in working if I can get the same amount of money by doing nothing.' I think you've got to reward people who make the effort, rather than penalise them."

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

"Leave their money well alone, because it isn't enough for anybody to exactly take a luxury holiday on."

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

"They should set the levels at a realistic level and not a stupid level, because otherwise they're not going to get any kids working at all."

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

After explanation and discussion, however, many came to understand the issue (support is given to those in full-time education, but not to those in work-based training, regardless of extra-curricular hours or income) and to regard the situation as unfair. These respondents tended to suggest a threshold which would be common to both full-time education and work-based training, and would therefore ensure young people (and their families) in both situations were treated equally. Some, however, continued to believe that the effect would be to penalise those in full-time education, or that those in work-based training were worse off because they had less time to supplement their income, and that this was a matter of choice, not discrimination by the government.

"If they're in education and they're doing the hours and the education that the government want them to do, I don't think it should matter what hours they're working."

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Little consensus emerged as to whether any threshold should be based on hours or income. Arguments were put forward for both, but none with conviction. Those in favour of income thought that money was the

issue, and that income might bear little relation to the number of hours worked. On the other hand, hours might be easier to measure, as cash in hand was thought unlikely to be declared.

“You can work as long as you like – it’s the income that counts... You could have someone who works four hours a day who earns more than someone who works 15 hours a day.”

Group 4: London area; African-Caribbean; C2DE

Many felt that both would be difficult to measure because young people’s working patterns vary enormously, and that any attempts to do so would be time-consuming. Taking this further, some thought the government would already have this information, and wondered why it could not do the calculations itself.

“You’d be filling in forms all the time. You’d be doing it every week. Some weeks you’d be doing 20 hours, some weeks you’d be doing six hours.”

Group 5: Wales rural; ethnicity not controlled for; C2DE

“These tax credits are to do with the Inland Revenue, so they could do the same. They’d have a record of whatever anybody does, then they could see for themselves.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

5. Streams of support

“Which streams of financial support should be included in any single system of support specifically for 16-19 year olds, and which should be left outside?”

Opinions were divided on this question. Some felt that, in principle, it would be simplest to combine all streams of support into a single payment. This, they argued would make benefits easier to collect and to understand.

“Getting it all under one roof would help. You’re going right, left and centre and it’s the same story – lack of communication.”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

The majority, however, foresaw problems with this idea. Some thought it would complicate matters and make the application more difficult.

“Can you imagine the size of the form? It would be horrendous!”

Group 2: South urban; low unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

A number thought difficulties and confusion would arise if the claimant stopped being eligible for one benefit, which might have knock-on effects on other streams of support. Keeping them separate would make this easier to monitor. Others were suspicious that a combined payment would be less transparent, and that benefits might be reduced covertly. Overriding these concerns was the feeling that, at the moment, support streams were separate because they catered for separate needs; few saw the need to change this system.

"It's all different at the end of the day."

Group 1: North urban; high unemployment; mostly white British; C2DE

Appendix

NFPI RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

Address:

.....

Tel:

Sex: Female () Male ()

Marital status: Single () Married/cohabiting ()

Children: Yes () WRITE IN AGES AND SEX.....

(Must have children between aged 15 and 20 years)

Occupation:(HOH)

SeS: C2 () D () E ()

Ethnic origin:.....

-

QA Do you or any of your family work in any of the following occupations or industries?

- Advertising ()
- Marketing ()
- Market research ()
- Public relations ()
- Journalism ()
- Broadcasting ()

IF YES TO ANY OF THE ABOVE, CLOSE, DO NOT RECRUIT. OTHERWISE GO TO QB.

QB Have you ever attended a market research group discussion or interview?

- Yes () GO TO QC
- No () GO TO Q1

QC How long ago was the last market research group discussion or interview you attended?

- Within the last 6 months CLOSE
Longer than 6 months ago GO TO QD

QD What subject(s) have you ever discussed at a market research group discussion or interview? WRITE IN BELOW

.....

CLOSE IF RELATED TO THIS RESEARCH TOPIC. OTHERWISE GO TO Q1.

Q1 **Thinking about your child(ren) aged between 15 and 20:**

1a How would you describe their current occupation or study?

- In full-time education Category A
Work-based training/apprenticeship Category B
Unemployed – and not doing any training/education Category C
Employed – and not doing any training/education Category D

PLEASE RECRUIT A MIX OF CATEGORIES IN EACH GROUP, WITH NO MORE THAN ONE RESPONDENT FROM CATEGORY D.

1b And where are they living at the moment?

- Still at home
Left home

PLEASE TRY TO RECRUIT ONE OR TWO RESPONDENTS IN EACH GROUP WHOSE CHILD(REN) HAVE LEFT HOME.

RECRUIT AS APPROPRIATE.

TOPIC GUIDE – SUPPORT FOR 16-19s

Moderator to explain purpose of the research and the subject under discussion – i.e. that the government is planning to restructure the support system for 16-19 year olds and is seeking input from parents into this process.

NB Stimulus 9: ‘Simplifying support – possible model’ will be used throughout the discussion as and where appropriate to illustrate the proposed changes.

BACKGROUND

Personal introduction (name, age, occupation/employment status).
Make-up of house-hold. Note ethnic origin.

Information about their child: age of child; living arrangements (at home or not); what child is currently doing as their main activity (i.e. FT education; FT education + PT employment; FT work-based training; FT employment; PT employment and/or PT training/education; currently not working, in training or studying).

INTRODUCTION TO REVIEW (IN BRIEF)

Moderator to show Stimulus 1 and 2: ‘Introduction’ and ‘Steps on the way’

(Briefly) What do respondents make of the plan to restructure the current system? How well does the system work at the moment? Have they encountered any problems or difficulties with the current system? If so, what and why? What do they think of the steps described here? Do these seem like the right issues for the government to be addressing?

SECTION 1: ACTIVITIES

Moderator to explain that the purpose of the research is to explore parents' views on a few quite specific issues; and that he/she will show and read out information about these issues and then ask respondents what they think.

Moderator to read out the following text and show Stimulus 3: 'Other Activities'

"This first section is about which activities – in addition to mainstream education and vocational training – should be eligible for financial support, and under what conditions.

At the moment, financial support for the families of young people (Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit) is only available if they are in full-time education at school or college. The Government is planning to extend this support to the families of young people on unpaid work-based training programmes (e.g. Entry to Employment in England and Skill Build in Wales).

But some young people, for various different reasons, might not be in a position to go on a formal course of education or training, and therefore do not qualify for this family support. They may however be looking for a suitable course of learning, or engaged in other worthwhile activities that help to develop skills or overcome personal barriers to participation. While the Government will not usually give money to the parents of young people who are simply doing nothing, it would be willing to recognise and support activities that help the young person to progress towards full participation in learning."

What do respondents think about the prospect of offering support to young people for activities other than education and training? Is this an issue they have come across themselves, where support for such activities might have been useful? Describe.

What sort of activities should be included under the definition of approved activities? What would the criteria be? Explore responses, then prompt:

Show Stimulus 4: 'Suggestions of approved activities'

What do they think of these suggestions? Which seem more or less acceptable, and why?

Moderator to explain that the Government is thinking of a system whereby these activities are negotiated with the young person, because young people vary so much in their interests and abilities.

How should an activity agreement be drawn up between the state and the young person? Is it a good idea to have a system where these activities are personally negotiated with the young person, taking account of their individual needs and circumstances? Is it better to focus on meeting specific individual goals and learning outcomes, rather than working from a prescriptive list of approved activities?

What do respondents think about the government setting a time limit on their support for these types of activities? Should support be given indefinitely, or should there be some kind of limit? If the latter, how should this time limit be decided? Should it be the same in every situation, or should it be determined by other criteria? If so, what should these be?

Are there other conditions apart from a time limit that should be applied to these other activities? If so, what and why?

What role should the individuals/parents/youth workers and professionals play in deciding which activities should be eligible for support? Should parents be consulted about the nature and length of a programme of activities for their child? Why/why not?

SECTION 2: INDEPENDENCE

Moderator to read out the following text and show Stimulus 5: 'Leaving home'

"This section is about defining when a young person is sufficiently independent that financial support (Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit) should no longer be paid to their parents or carers.

Leaving home

Young people aged 16-17 who leave home often have difficulty accessing direct financial support quickly because they need to provide evidence to the Jobcentre that living at home would cause them physical or emotional harm. The Government is keen to improve its service and support to vulnerable young people who leave home in traumatic circumstances, but is aware of the need to balance this with appropriate checks to protect public money and avoid encouraging young people to leave home early."

How can the financial support system be more responsive to the needs of young people who leave home at 16-17 without encouraging people to leave home too soon?

One option would be that the young person who has left home receives support as soon as they have applied, and then checks are made afterwards. Is this a good idea? What are the advantages and disadvantages? Should every case be investigated, or only a random sample?

Should it be enough for a third party (e.g. advice centre, youth worker or Connexions) to confirm that the young person is unable to live at home? Or do there need to be further checks?

Other circumstances

In what other circumstances should a young person be considered independent from their parents/carers?

Show Stimulus 6: 'Other people who might be defined as 'independent'

What do respondents think about these possible definitions of independence? Should these groups of people be defined as independent (i.e. have their money paid direct to them, rather than via their parents)? Why / why not? Might the last two examples be open to abuse?

Can they think of any other situations where young people should be defined as independent?

Financial independence while living at home

Moderator to read out following text and show Stimulus 7: 'Financial independence while living at home':

"Of course independence also has a financial angle. Many young people say they feel independent from their parents even when they are living at home because they have their own personal disposable income to spend on their social life, clothes and music etc. Parents may add that independence comes when the young person earns enough to pay for necessities, board and lodgings.

One of the current unfair things about the current financial support system is that no account is taken of a young person's income. Instead, dependence and independence are defined by the young person's main activity, with family support available for 16-19 year olds in full-time education at school or college – even if they also work part-time – but not for those in work-based training or part-time education.

What's more, it's much more difficult for trainees to supplement their income with additional part-time work compared with those in

education, because they must spend the majority of their working week on their training programme.

Given the wide range of learning and earning options and combinations available for young people, the Government thinks that it may be fairer to introduce a common income threshold on young people's earnings, above which the family support is no longer paid. This income test would aim to smooth the financial support available to young people following different learning routes, by treating all income equally, regardless of whether it comes from work-based training or part-time work on top of education."

Do respondents think this proposed income threshold is a good idea? Why/why not? How do they think it should operate?

Measuring income

Moderator to read following text.

"Income is a difficult thing to measure. This may be particularly true of young people whose income comes from a variety of different sources, cash in hand, varying week to week and term-time to holidays. There would be an administrative burden on the individual to inform the state of their earnings."

Do respondents think it would be more difficult – more of a burden for parents/children – to check on the number of hours a young person works or to check on how much they are paid?

Do you think it would be better to stick with the current system, where hours rules are used to decide independence (e.g. no family financial support for individuals working over 25 hours), and continue to ignore income?

SECTION 3: STREAMS OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Moderator to read the following text and show Stimulus 8: ‘Types of financial support’.

“The Government needs to decide which types of support should be put together into a single financial support system for 16-19 year olds. It wants to end up with a system that is easy to use for young people in all kinds of situations.”

Which stream of specialist financial support do respondents think should be included in the system and which left out? Show options to consider.

Would it make sense to include all these different payments in the same system? Would it make life easier if all support was paid from the same source, following the same criteria? Or would it be better to keep some payments separate from the conditions of the activity/learning agreements?

SUMMING UP

What do respondents make of the information they have seen this evening? What has struck them as the most important issue? Which of the suggested changes to the system do they think will make the most difference?

1. Introduction

- The Government is carrying out a review of financial support for 16-19 year olds
- The aim is to ensure that all young people have the support they need to participate in learning post-16
- This will be done by:
 - supporting young people's choices
 - delivering decent minimum levels of income to young people and their families
 - providing an accessible system of support
 - simplifying current complex arrangements

2. Steps on the way

Some key steps are...

- making sure young people earn decent wages and training wages
- allowing young people to choose between education and training without any financial penalty
- removing the support cut-off at age 19
- improving access to information and services

3. Other Activities

- At the moment, families can only receive money if the young person is in full-time education
- Soon this support will be extended to cover work-based training programmes as well
- But some young people are not in a position to go on a full-time course or get an apprenticeship
- However, they may be involved in other worthwhile activities that the Government is willing to support

4. Suggestion of approved activities

Activities to develop learning and skills, for example:

- volunteering
- informal learning
- periods when the young person is waiting for a course to begin (e.g. if they have switched courses)
- combining part-time learning with other responsibilities, e.g. parenting, caring, employment

Activities to help remove barriers to working and learning, for example:

- finding accommodation if homeless
- sessions with a child psychologist to overcome personal problems
- behavioural skills course for young offenders

5. Leaving home

- Difficult for 16-17s leaving home to get financial support quickly
- Need to prove to Jobcentre that living at home would be harmful for them
- Government is keen to improve support
- But need to balance support with appropriate checks:
 - to protect public money
 - to avoid encouraging young people to leave home early

6. Other people who might be defined as 'independent'

- Young people who are parents (though still living at home)
- Young people who are married (though still living at home)
- Young people who are living at home or with a relative, but do not receive any financial support.
- Young people who have to live away from home because their course of study is located elsewhere.

7. Financial independence while living at home

- Many young people feel independent because they have their own disposable income or pay for board and lodgings.
- The current system takes no account of the young person's income when deciding if they are independent or not.
- Instead, it all depends on what the young person is doing.
- So, someone who is in full-time education will receive financial help, even if they're working part-time as well...
- ...While someone doing work-based training won't get support – even if they're earning less.
- The Government thinks it might be fairer to set the same income threshold for all young people, whatever activity they're doing.

8. Types of financial support

- Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit for young people who are parents themselves
- Childcare costs
- Travel costs
- Disability Living Allowance
- Housing Benefit

9. Simplifying support – possible model

