



Youth unemployment — in their own words

Nearly one million young people aged 16–24 are currently unemployed in the UK. Behind the statistics, what is it like being young and out of work? We spoke to a number of young Affinity Sutton residents who have experienced life at the sharp end of the current jobs market about their lives and their views about how the situation can be improved for young people across the country.

In a recent survey of more than 1000 of our residents of which just under 10% were aged 18–24 we found:

Those aged 18–24 were more likely to be unemployed and looking for work than any other age band.

- 37% were unemployed and looking for work
- 23% were in full-time employment
- 1% were in part-time work.
- 29% were worried about work or finding work

About the research

Affinity Sutton spoke to young people aged 18–25 from across the country who were residents in Affinity Sutton homes and either currently unemployed or who had experiences of unemployment. The qualitative research undertaken at these events incorporated group discussions and individual interviews.



Is there a typical face of youth unemployment?

The young people we spoke to had diverse backgrounds and experiences. Some were living with their parents, some were care leavers setting up on their own whilst others were parents of young children themselves. Some were currently studying, either full-time or part-time whilst others were doing voluntary work. A few of the young people we spoke to were currently working, but had previously had periods of unemployment.

Many had experiences in their lives which affected their current employability. A small number had been in trouble in the past which had either resulted in a criminal record or poor educational attainment:

"I wish I could go back to school and sort things out, do things differently... when I was there I didn't want to be in school, but now I look back on it... I messed up my life."

One young person had become the primary carer for her younger siblings when her mother died, whilst another had spent some of her teenage years living in hostels. Another had a learning disability.

There was no such thing as a typical day for these young people. Whilst some had busy schedules, juggling childcare, college work and other activities, some spent large parts of their day killing time at home:

"My days are so hectic — I'm trying to develop on my skills for when I do find a job — my days are quite full-on."

I get so bored sitting at home, on my computer — I need to find a job — anything really at the moment... but I'll be honest lately I've just had no motivation at all."

"I'm always thinking of a plan..I'm always planning, trying to be productive."

It was clear that being out of work had sapped the confidence and motivation of some of the young people: this was not only affecting their employment prospects but was having a much wider impact on their lives and their general self-belief. Those who were fairing best appeared to be those with the greatest personal resilience and clear long term goals to focus on.

Why work?



“Money ... it’s the money situation.”

Money was one of the main driving forces behind the desire to find work, but far from the only one.

“I want to go on holidays, have fun at the weekend ... you need money to have fun, to live.”

“If I didn’t have my job I wouldn’t be able to afford to go to college.”

Finding work could itself be an expensive process, and they sometimes found lack of money was itself a barrier to job searches. From phone credit, internet access, money to print copies of CVs or to travel to interviews, “everything costs”.

Not having money could have a negative impact on the extent to which they were connected to friends — some spoke of staying at home because they couldn’t pay their own way: *“it makes you really depressed.”*

Although money was high on their list of priorities, they also recognised how important work was for their own self-worth, as well as providing structure, social opportunities and the chance to improve their life-skills. Repeated rejections have a damaging impact, eating away at their confidence:

“Looking for a job can be really demoralising, when you keep getting rejections or they don’t get back to you ... what makes it bad when it’s happening to young people is it sets this tone, it can sort of change how you see the world, it can be quite rough seeing everything going on and thinking ‘why can’t I be part of that?’”

“You try and try and keep on getting rejected, and that’s when you give up.”

Some also recognised that having a job was a key step on the road to achieving wider personal ambitions: *“mortgage, kids, family.”* Without work they felt their lives had stalled before they’d started.

Life 'on the dole'

Some admitted that life 'on the dole' can "get comfortable." However, this tended to be a case of falling into a negative cycle when motivation slipped, rather than being content to remain unemployed:

"When you're on jobseekers allowance you do feel bad... because you think what have I done to earn this... it doesn't feel good."

"I think to myself do I really want to be in the same situation in five years' time — so I get to like 40 years of age and I've still not got my dream job and I've wasted my entire life, for what?"

"I'd love to get up earlier, have a job, go out, come home."

Being out of work could have a negative impact on both mental and physical health. Some found the temptation to get up late, stay at home and eat "junk food" meant they had a less active lifestyle, but the main toll was on their mental wellbeing. Many spoke about feeling depressed, stressed and "degraded" when they were out of work. In contrast working, although sometimes tough, generally helped them feel valued and motivated:

"Since I've started working I've got a much healthier mindset."

"I think the happiest time of my life was when I was working, to be honest... soon as I stopped working I got really bored and depressed, sometimes I wonder even what's the point of waking up in the morning."

Whilst some believed that the challenge to find work was theirs alone, others felt they were victims of wider social and economics circumstances:

"I've done all I can. I've been to college, I've got my qualifications — the government's messed things up for me."

"You keep hearing on the news that it's a lost generation... the mistakes of others, much older than us, come down on us — we have to pay the price."

A Job or a Career?

"What happens if you don't just want a job, you want a career?"

A few of the young people didn't have a clear sense of the type of work they wanted to do: *"I just see myself in stable work, earning money... that's it really"*. However most of them had either a specific career ambition or a strong sense of the type of work they'd like to be doing (and what they didn't want to do):

"Most important thing to me is doing something you enjoy, but obviously you've got to be able to eat... finding away to do what you love but live off it at the same time."

Often the young people found that the only opportunities they were being signposted towards didn't fit in with their existing skills or experience, or the career direction they were hoping to take.

Money worries or pressure from the Jobcentre could lead them to apply for jobs that didn't fit in with their aspirations, and they often felt a conflict between the need to get-by in the short term versus their desire not to abandon their longer-term career goals.

"Jobcentre trying to talk me into call centres or retail, but I don't want to go down that route because it's taking me away from where I want to be heading."

A sense of personal ambition often seemed to be one of the main factors in maintaining young people's sense of self-worth. Lowering expectations to accept short-term or low-paid work ran the risk of undermining their confidence and having a negative long-term effect. There appeared to be a need for support making these decisions and ensuring that they could maintain their ambitions whilst recognising the need for realism.

“When you’re on job seekers, everything you spend you’re tallying up, you’re keeping a calculation, you can’t treat yourself... your money is going on food and travel and that is it.”

The benefits trap

“They need to make sure that if people are going into work, regardless of how many hours it is, you can actually live.”

The young people who had been dependent on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) whilst looking for work spoke of the struggle to get by financially week-to-week:

“When you’re on job seekers, everything you spend you’re tallying up, you’re keeping a calculation, you can’t treat yourself... your money is going on food and travel and that is it.”

In some cases after paying bills and other essential expenses, they were left with less than £10 a week for food. Some found they got into debt or rent arrears whilst they were dependent on benefits — something which had a long-term impact as when they found work much of their income went to paying off these earlier debts.

Despite the fact that in some cases JSA left people with barely enough to get by, some felt that their incomes were more dependable on benefits, and that knowing that housing costs and council tax would be taken care of was reassuring. Some thought that they could be worse-off in work, particularly if they could only find a part-time job.

Taking a job sometimes involved taking a gamble, as if the job didn’t work out it can take time to get

benefits reinstated, risking financial difficulty or debt. If they feel the job has prospects then the gamble is worth it, but if they were less confident about where the job would lead, they were more apprehensive about taking it on.

Part-time or low-paid jobs, irregular hours and overtime can all contribute to complications with benefits which can leave young people feeling worse off than if they weren’t working.

It can be difficult to understand the benefits system, and some felt there is a lack of support and guidance to help people entering work understand how it will impact their benefits entitlement. In particular there was a lack of awareness about the benefits that could be claimed in-work:

“When I started work I started getting loads of bills through that I never expected.”

“I didn’t find out until three months of working that I might be entitled to a percentage of housing benefit, or working tax credit.”

Some of the young people, in particular some of those living with their parents, chose not to sign-on, either because they felt it was too much hassle, particularly if they were in-and-out of work, or because they believed they shouldn’t be claiming benefits if their parents were able to support them.

“Your name’s not worth anything [to them] ... you’re just a number ... a statistic, another person on the dole.”

Where support is needed

The young people we spoke to had very mixed experiences of support to find employment. Most believed that visits to the Jobcentre were more of an administrative exercise than a genuine attempt to help them into work:

“You go in there to get the support but people don’t really support you ... they’ve got two minutes to look at your job search, sign you off, tell you your money’s coming ... it’s really quite a depressing feeling.”

“Your name’s not worth anything [to them] ... you’re just a number ... a statistic, another person on the dole.”

The type of support that they wanted was more personalised, recognising their career aspirations and helping them find work which would help them in the long as well as the short term. Those who had been involved in the Work Programme had generally found this a more positive experience as they felt there was both a greater determination to help them find a job, and a more flexible, tailored approach.

The young people felt that the support that would be most useful to them included help from people who were well connected to employers in the fields they wanted to work in. Some felt that some job opportunities were only available to those ‘in the know’ and that help connecting them to these opportunities was key. A number of the young

people had examples of being linked into training opportunities, voluntary work, apprenticeships and jobs either via formal support mechanisms or more informally.

Chances to talk to people working in the profession they want to work in would be valuable, for example via mentoring schemes and job shadowing opportunities.

“It’s knowing what you want to achieve but not knowing how you get there.”

As well as practical help, support was also sometimes needed to raise self-belief and maintain motivation. Voluntary work could help with this, as well as helping develop skills. A number of the young people we spoke to had been involved in voluntary activities from working in a charity shop to volunteering at a youth centre. Young people would also value more employers being willing to “give them a chance” in short term work trials, as long as they didn’t feel they were being exploited for ‘free labour’.

Some thought that more could happen earlier on, particularly in schools, to help prepare young people for adult life:

“When you’re at school you don’t know about the different options ... you know about jobs but you don’t know about careers.”

THE LAST WORD

We asked young people what working means to them:

“When you get your wage slip at the end of the week and think ‘yes’, I earned that.”

“Going to work, getting on a packed train with everyone in their suits ... made me feel good about myself ... like I’m now one of these people.”

“I could plan my future ... feel like I have a future.”

“Happy, healthy, settled, valuable.”

“I would feel a lot happier and more confident in myself”

“A reason to get up in the morning”

“I would be serving a purpose in life”

CASE STUDY: AFFINITY SUTTON APPRENTICE



Having to move out of home aged 16 and initially living in hostels, she felt she “never really knew where I wanted to go in life”. Support

she received at the time helped her “get my head straight” and made her realise she wanted to “give back” – initially by volunteering at a youth club.

She moved into an Affinity Sutton property in earlier this year: “since then my life has kind of changed”. A support worker at Affinity Sutton helped to get on her feet in her new home, and put her in touch with different opportunities which helped her develop her skills. She became one of Affinity Sutton’s young ambassadors, and from there started an apprenticeship in youth engagement.

“When I started my job ... just to come home and think my job is worthwhile, I’m appreciated for what I do and I’m helping people change their lives ... it’s cool, a good feeling. My life has changed ... I feel I’ve got my foot in the door, I’m gaining the experience I need, I’m getting so much support from Affinity Sutton ... I know now that there’s no turning back – I feel positive about my future.”

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