



Youth Unemployment Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Youth unemployment

Tuesday 8 June 2021

11.20 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Shipley (The Chair); Lord Baker of Dorking; Lord Clarke of Nottingham; Lord Davies of Oldham; Lord Empey; Lord Hall of Birkenhead; Lord Layard; Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall; Baroness Newlove; Lord Storey; Lord Woolley of Woodford.

Evidence Session No. 13

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 134 - 140

Witnesses

I: Michelle Rainbow, Skills Director, North East Local Enterprise Partnership; Meredith Teasdale, Strategic Director – Together for Families, Cornwall Council.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of Witnesses

Michelle Rainbow and Meredith Teasdale.

Q134 The Chair: Welcome to this evidence session of the Youth Unemployment Committee. The meeting is being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the committee website. You will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary.

I welcome our two witnesses, Michelle Rainbow and Meredith Teasdale, to this evidence session. I am going to ask each of you to introduce yourselves, in a few sentences, to the committee.

Michelle Rainbow: Good morning. I am the skills director at the North East Local Enterprise Partnership, also known as a LEP. Our LEP is a seven-local-authority geography in the north-east of England, covering Tyne and Wear, Northumberland and Durham.

Meredith Teasdale: I am the strategic director for children, schools and families at Cornwall Council, which is the statutory director of children's services. I am also responsible for the children element of the integrated care system for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. My career over the last 25 years has been focused on improving outcomes for children and young people, in both their quality and quantity of life.

The Chair: Thank you both very much indeed for that brief introduction. I want to ask you each a question that asks you to reflect on your local area. Beyond the Covid crisis, what challenges do young people face when it comes to finding high-quality employment in your areas? That is a very general question.

Michelle Rainbow: There are a range, and it varies depending on circumstances, the communities that young people live in, the level of education and, in some cases, the geographical location. In no particular order, I would say that there are a number. Digital poverty has become an increasing problem, which has certainly been exacerbated by the Covid crisis. Young people who do not have access to IT equipment or connectivity find it quite difficult and challenging to go through an online process to apply for jobs et cetera. If you just have a phone or a hand-held device, it is quite difficult to fill in applications that require lengthy responses.

Travel is an issue. Parts of the north-east are rural, particularly Northumberland and Durham. The affordability of travel, particularly on an apprenticeship salary, for example, means that there are often challenges for young people to get to work. In those areas, it can be really difficult to travel to work without a car.

Poor parental literacy is a challenge for some young people—the ability of parents and carers to support a young person in applying for jobs or roles, or to think about the aspirations of that young person. Practical support can often be difficult.

There seems to be a requirement for experience. I see job adverts, for what you would think are entry-level jobs, asking for experience. Traditionally, you would get experience through a Saturday role or a part-time role, perhaps while you were still in education. In our part of the world, those roles are often filled with people or families who need a portfolio of jobs. It can be quite difficult for young people to obtain opportunities to gain work experience—not necessarily to do with the job that they are going to do eventually but just to demonstrate that they have some sort of experience. Looking at the very latest vacancy levels, I have to say that that does seem to be improving. Our hospitality and leisure industries, where, traditionally, a lot of these young people get experience, seem to be bouncing back a bit, so we are quite hopeful that that might change.

Lastly, it is fairly widely acknowledged that, over the last few years, careers guidance has been patchy at best, and poor in some cases. The introduction of the careers strategy has enabled us to make great strides on this. The north-east piloted the Gatsby benchmarks in 2015 and we have seen big improvements. We are focusing in particular on making sure that young people have access to really good labour market information about the opportunities available to them now, rather than what was available to their parents or grandparents in previous years, as well as information on the growth sectors and what is happening in our region. We are making sure that that is translated into something that young people understand and can access.

That is not a finite list; there are lots of things I could say, but those are a few examples of the challenges that young people can face.

Meredith Teasdale: You will be aware that Cornwall is both a rural and a coastal area of the country, so one of the key issues for us, which is the same as in the north-east, is transport. Some of our apprentices are spending 35% of their wages on transport costs to get to their place of work.

We have an issue around seasonality: there is a high level of work available in the summer months and that drops down in the winter months. That also links through to low wages and a high level of zero-hour contracts, which all contribute to the issues around employment of our young people in Cornwall.

In a similar way to the north-east, there is competition with more experienced candidates, because the portfolios of work that families have mean that, quite often, older people with experience are also in the jobs that young people would naturally go into.

A slight difference is that Cornwall is made up predominantly of small and medium enterprises, microbusinesses and self-employed businesses. We have very few large employers, which is an additional issue for us. We work really well with our small-to-medium businesses, but they have only so much capacity to take on young people.

Sometimes our system of welfare benefits does not help. If a young person is living in the home, that then impacts on the family's benefits.

Within both Wolverhampton and Cornwall, I have experienced times when the family have not wanted a young person to be in employment because of the potential impact on the family's benefits. So those would be some of the issues that we have in Cornwall.

The Chair: That issue of the impact on benefits is one that we ought to note particularly for future examination.

You talked a moment ago about apprenticeship travel subsidy issues and how difficult it is because of the cost of travel. We heard in our last witness session from Steve Rotherham that there was a subsidy of half-price travel for apprentices going to work. Clearly, that is an urban area; Cornwall is not, and distances are much greater. Do you have any subsidy schemes at all? Have you tried to get any?

Meredith Teasdale: We are working with our transport providers around subsidies—we are having some of those conversations at the moment. Our children in care are benefiting from a subsidy system around transport. We have programmes such as Wheels to Work, which is supporting young people with scooters—although whether it is economically viable for them depends on the distance that they need to travel. We have a number of things in place, but it is an area that we as a council continue to work on with our transport providers and with the LEP.

Some young people are not on a transport route, because we are such a rural area, so they need to get to the bus route in the first place to be able to get somewhere. It is not as simple as having a subsidy for bus transport. We are not as lucky as the north-east, which I think has a fairly comprehensive transport system. We have a good one, but it just does not go to every hamlet—I do not want to land us in it.

Lord Storey: I am in Keswick at the moment and I was quite shocked to see—this is no exaggeration—every single shop and restaurant with vacancy signs for staff. Since our departure from the EU, the problem of getting seasonal staff has become really difficult, and Meredith mentioned this. Michelle also mentioned that the hospitality industry was bouncing back a bit. The businesses themselves are obviously desperate for staff, but I wondered whether this could be turned into an opportunity, in some way, to attract people to give them further training in the hospitality industry. But maybe it becomes a buyer's market, where, if businesses are to get the staff they need, wages will have to go up and the practices that Meredith talked about might be on the wane, such as zero-hour contracts in seasonal work.

Meredith Teasdale: We are using the community renewal fund to help with this area. For us, it is not only hospitality but also agriculture and the green economy, and making sure that we have the right flow-through to the skills that we need in that area. We have a really strong college that is turning itself around, Cornwall College, and the agricultural training that it does is really strong. We are making those links. There is a bit of a time lag between Brexit and what we are able to do, but there are huge opportunities there. Working with our LEP, we are linking those

small agricultural and hospitality businesses with the young people and the skills that are required.

I agree that there are opportunities and ways of using the funding that is coming through to help with that. But a change of perception, culturally, is required, to say that these vocational jobs are really good and are an opportunity to progress. We know that, within the agricultural sector, people can progress fairly quickly to team manager level, but that is not necessarily the perception that people have. We are doing a piece of work with DWP to support that. I agree with you, but it will take a longer time to ensure that we have that change.

Michelle Rainbow: I agree with Meredith's last comment that there needs to be a change within the industry itself. We experienced this in the north-east about five or six years ago, when customer service call centres were struggling to find and retain staff. There were plenty of vacancies, but it was about the reputation of the industry itself. A group of businesses got together and decided that they needed to create a better narrative, so that they could demonstrate that it was a good job, that they were not all zero-hour contracts, and that progression opportunities and training were available to enable people to stay in the customer service sector.

Hospitality and leisure may need to look at that and see how to pull it together, so that the reputation it has is not about seasonal, zero-hours contracts but about a good job and a career and something you could make a really good living from. Put that message over to young people. That is something that we would like to see going forward.

Q135 Lord Woolley of Woodford: Michelle, I am sure that all my peers are extremely interested to know a little more about your ground-breaking work on the careers benchmarks primary project, which is still in 70 schools. I guess you can link that with your advanced manufacturing document that links in with all the big companies. First, can you tell us how important it is for primary school children to begin to understand what careers there might be further down the track and how that can be a meaningful conversation?

Secondly, are all the exams fit for purpose, such that they might translate into meaningful work? I have been particularly struck by language students who are getting A* grades but coming out not speaking the language. How can what they are taught and guided on be practical and fit for purpose when they come out the other side?

Michelle Rainbow: Let me set in context the reason that we embarked on this. Working with primary schools and primary school children is lovely, but we recognised that this is a really important economic driver. We have suffered in the north-east from a mismatch between skills supply and skills demand; that has been fairly historic. We are starting to get there but we have not cracked it.

We were the pilot area for the Gatsby benchmarks in secondary schools and colleges. Our primary schools understood what was going on in secondary schools and asked us, "Why can we not start this earlier? Why

can we not use the framework that has been created to start delivering careers-related learning and careers guidance in a primary setting?" So that is what we did. We kept the benchmarks the same but adapted the key characteristics in order to deliver it in a primary setting.

We developed an audit tool, so that schools could look at how they performed against the benchmarks and self-assess. We were not sure how it would go down. We put an expression of interest out and anticipated that we would persuade maybe a few primary schools to join, but we were overwhelmed. We had 140 applications from different primary schools across the north-east. We chose 70 across various geographies and locations. We chose schools that specialised in pupils with disabilities and learning difficulties. There was a real mixture: rural, coastal, urban, deprived and more affluent.

Increasingly, the evidence shows that careers education or careers-related learning should start at primary school. There is an increasing evidence base that demonstrates that leaving it until secondary school is too late. Our finding is that it is important for this work to start in early years and not just key stage 2. It needs to be age-appropriate. It needs to link to the career strategy that is already established at secondary school level and upwards. With our support, primary teachers have been excellent at adapting careers-related learning for primary-age children. The benchmarks have been a really useful framework on which to hang that.

One thing that all the research says is that, by the age of seven, life-limiting decisions are already being formed in young people: the types of jobs that they can do or see their family doing; the types of jobs that suit their gender; or the types of jobs that they can or cannot do if they have a disability or a learning challenge. All those things become solidified by about the age of seven, so we need to start thinking about how we broaden those horizons.

We have worked really closely with schools on supporting parents and families to understand exactly what the opportunities are. Parents are the biggest influencers on a young person's career and career aspirations. We need to ensure that we work with the school, the young people, and their parents and community, to understand the opportunities that are there for them.

We know that, in secondary schools, benchmark 4, which is around careers in the curriculum, has been a challenge because, in our experience, the curriculum is not always easy to adapt to deliver that. In primary, it is much easier, and benchmark 4 is the one that all our primary schools succeeded very quickly in achieving. They were able to adapt quite quickly the curriculum in the primary setting to do that.

The question on exams is a hard one to answer. My view is that we need to demonstrate a level of competency and understanding, and to test oral and written skills. Whether the exams and the curriculum are entirely fit for purpose at the moment, when we look at what our data is telling us about what skills are needed going forward, is open to further debate.

We have now had a year of the primary pilot and are looking to expand it. We have a number of primary schools and academy chains from around the country wanting to think about how they might expand this to their own schools, so I would say that it has been a success. We work very closely with DfE, which is interested in what we are doing. Clearly there are lots of priorities for the Department for Education at the moment, such as catching up after Covid, but we genuinely want to push for the rollout of careers-related learning into the primary setting. It is incredibly important.

Lord Woolley of Woodford: Are careers hubs a good model for effective careers advice delivery?

Michelle Rainbow: Yes. We have four in our area. The schools within the four receive really intensive support. Having said that, we work with all 170 of our secondary schools across the north-east through digital means or career-leaders network meetings to bring them together, so that there is a peer-to-peer network where careers leaders can learn from each other about the ways in which careers can be improved.

It is quite a good model that we would like to see expanded. This is such an important area for us that we would like to have the same offer for all our schools, so that every student and every young person has the opportunity to go to a school that belongs to a hub.

The Chair: Meredith, I am going to pass over to Lord Empey in a moment for a specific question about Cornwall, but was there anything on the primary sector that you wanted to add? Is there anything that we should know about Cornwall?

Meredith Teasdale: I support what Michelle said about the importance of making sure that, from an early stage, children know what their options are and that they are not just defined by what the family has experienced. We look at and work around that in Cornwall, but it is not as comprehensive a package as Michelle has outlined.

Q136 **Lord Empey:** Good morning, Meredith. I want to ask you about the relationship between the local authority and the local enterprise partnership. Sometimes relationships between local government and other bodies can be a bit problematic, and I am particularly interested in your take on the quality of that current relationship.

Meredith Teasdale: The fundamental issue is relationships. As Michelle said in the conversation about careers advice, it is about the relationship with the child and the young person. It is exactly the same between the local authority and the LEP. We have a really good relationship and that is supported by the fact that our economic growth service director, Glenn Caplin-Grey, is also CEO of the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LEP, so we have that overlap. There is a real strength within the LEP. There is a skills subgroup that the colleges and schools are part of. Again, that is based on really good relationships. We have a link with the chamber of commerce and, as I said previously, an important link with the Federation of Small Businesses.

I can demonstrate the strong impact that the local enterprise partnership has had as well. We talk to the LEP about the importance of children in care and care leavers having employment opportunities in Cornwall, and we are one of the three best local authorities at ensuring that our children in care are in employment, education or training. Last year, about 72% of our care leavers were in education, employment or training, whereas the national figure is about 50%. A lot of that is about that good relationship between the local authority and the LEP, and therefore with businesses, making sure that we understand the skills that are required, as well as businesses supporting our care leavers into work. There is a demonstrable sign of that effective relationship.

Lord Empey: That is a very positive reply. Are you satisfied that, from a purely structural point of view, the structures in your county are fine and adequate, or do you feel that any amendments would be required or helpful?

Meredith Teasdale: We are always reviewing the governance process and how that operates. We have had a recent review of the governance arrangements and particularly of the skills subgroup, and have put in place a process where, in the same way as college corporations, people apply for the post. We are making sure that we have that skills element within the governance arrangements for the skills board—that might not make sense—so that the right people on the board.

Like anything, it is about how people operate, work and communicate. At the moment, it is in a good place. Has that been my experience across the country in all the places I have worked? No, but it is about having that common vision and understanding, and then having the governance arrangements in place. I would always say that I am a people person, and so, for me, it is about how relationships are working and making sure that you can pick up the phone, have the conversations and have the right impact for the young people you serve.

Q137 **Lord Baker of Dorking:** Michelle, you are one of our unique witnesses because you are the first person we have met from a LEP. It is really interesting to see what the role is doing. I was very interested to see the policy you had towards primary schools. I consider LEPs to be responsible for giving advice on the general, overall economic policies of the area to stimulate new industries and things of that sort, but you have a responsibility for skills. Yours is the first example I have come across in which something has been done about primary schools. I very much welcome that, because it has to start there.

I would encourage you to be even bolder. It is no good just trying to persuade primary school children that there are things called factories, offices and jobs, and how interesting they can all be; that is all a bit distant. Lots of primary school children will have an iPhone. Their parents like to give them to them because they can then track where they are; not all of them would have an iPhone, but many do. So they have the instrument of a computer. I would encourage you to go further and to say that coding ought to be taught in primary schools.

This is not as controversial as it sounds. The Government's policy is that,

if primary schools want to do it, they can. As a result, lots of primary schools—usually in the richer, more prosperous areas—teach coding. I came across one primary school on the border with Wales that teaches coding from five. By 11, all their students can do computing up to the age of 14, and some can pass the GCSE not at 16 but at 11. It is all possible. I would encourage you to be even bolder.

I assume that, in your skills agenda for the north-east, you must have identified that the lack of digital skills is the biggest thing holding you back. I do not want to put words into your mouth, but is that what you find?

Michelle Rainbow: Yes, I agree. We distinguish between tech skills and digital skills. Digital skills are required in virtually every role now. The assumption that all young people are digital natives is wrong. Not all of them are, because a lot do not have access within their own home to the kind of equipment we are talking about. It is a really important element within schools to pick up where those gaps are. If we have young people who do not have access to digital means at home, they can make up that gap at school.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Would you recommend that all secondary school children should have their own computer? Some people are now talking about this as an active policy, but would you, as a LEP, be prepared to say to schools that every child should have access to a computer and a connection to the internet? This is now becoming standard in some areas.

Michelle Rainbow: The response to home-schooling during the Covid crisis has potentially demonstrated the requirement for that. We had a big effort when students were first sent home to ensure that those young people who did not have access to digital equipment or connectivity were supplied with that. Our schools and colleges were amazing, as were businesses and organisations that stepped into the breach to allow that to happen.

It means that children can go further. They are not confined to learning just when they are in the classroom environment. The world of learning and experiencing the outside world is accessible through that. My view is that, yes, they probably should, but that is my personal view.

Lord Baker of Dorking: I hope it becomes your institution's view as well—good for you. When you got to secondary schools, you said that exams are a bit trickier, which we accept entirely. You used the phrase "That is for further debate", but you are clearly dissatisfied with the way in which local schools turn out digital skills. I do not know whether you know that there is a university technical college at Newton Aycliffe.

Michelle Rainbow: Yes, we have two: one in Newcastle and one in Newton Aycliffe.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Yes, you are quite right. Thank you for reminding me of the Newcastle one—I usually remember them all. Have you visited either of them? I would encourage you to.

Michelle Rainbow: I have been to both.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Aren't you an angel? That is tremendous. You probably know that, last year, the one in Newton Aycliffe had no NEETs at all. Every one of its students either went to university, went into an apprenticeship or got a job locally. University technical colleges are local bodies and not part of the brain drain. They are linked to the local university and employers. Perhaps you need more than just two.

Michelle Rainbow: Maybe we do.

The Chair: Meredith, I want to pose a question to you about digital skills in Cornwall, following Lord Baker's point to Michelle about accessibility of laptops and connectivity. Is there anything from Cornwall that we ought to be learning about?

Meredith Teasdale: In relation to the previous question on the work that the DfE was doing about distributing laptops, we worked together with the LEP and said that we did not want any child of statutory school age to be without a piece of equipment or needing to share IT equipment with their siblings. We have reduced the digital divide over the Covid period and we are continuing that. It was one of the strategic aims of the LEP to make sure that that happened, and it has. That was through working with local businesses, as well as some crowdfunding, into which a number of local businesses put quite a substantial amount of money to make sure that there was additional equipment.

Connectivity is always an issue in Cornwall and something that we continue to work on and try to improve. It might be fairly good this weekend with the G7, but sometimes it is not so good.

The Chair: That is technical connectivity. There is financial connectivity. What about that?

Meredith Teasdale: Part of our work has been on ensuring that, where families have not been able to afford connectivity, we can find ways around that. Quite frequently, children with complex needs and their families were having real issues with connectivity, particularly when they were shielding, and we were finding ways of supplementing what was happening, so that they could ensure connectivity. It is always an issue and, to a certain extent, that was the step-up around Covid. How we maintain that over a longer period is an issue.

The other one is making sure that we have the right graduates coming through from teacher training, so that we have the right STEM and IT skills within schools. There is still work to be done on making sure that we really are the tech-savvy nation that we need to be.

Q138 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** My question arises directly out of the conversation you have just been having and is directed mostly towards Meredith, although I am sure that there will be some resonances in the north-east. It is about this thing that we loosely call a brain drain. Could you tell us about the experience of young people either choosing to leave the area, or more likely having no choice, in order to find employment?

You talked about Cornwall being a rural and a coastal area, and the very

specific difficulties that come with that. What is the experience for those communities of there simply not being the right opportunities available for young people? When they do leave—and I have no doubt that quite a lot of them do—is it always, or mostly, because of work being available elsewhere but not in their area, or is it also to do with the availability of accommodation? Is it to do with problems of second homes or rents, which are things that we know about an area that depends very much on tourism, among other things, and attracts a high level of second home owners?

I want you to talk a bit about the pressure on young people in your area that might drive them to leave. What are you doing to try to prevent that? Do you have confidence in the Government's assertion that the levelling-up agenda, which the Prime Minister has referred to many times, will help to reverse the brain drain affecting your area? I am sorry that that was rather a long question, but there is quite a lot in it.

Meredith Teasdale: It is really complicated. We have data looking at the destination of people who are in year 14. That does not really capture the brain drain, so this is anecdotal rather than based on hard data.

In any conversation you have with somebody in Cornwall, they will talk about a young person leaving Cornwall and going somewhere else. We have the University of Exeter campus at Falmouth, but it is relatively small, so the vast majority of young people will go outside of the duchy to a university. Indeed, people may well train to do vocational courses and will then move out of the duchy for a period. There is also evidence that people then move back into the duchy when they are starting a family, so it is really difficult to completely put the finger on the brain drain.

In a conversation yesterday with our newly elected cabinet, there was a conversation about 10 people having been close friends at school together and only three having remained in Cornwall and made it their home; other people had gone elsewhere to access different job opportunities. That is partly also because we do not have large businesses within Cornwall. So even if you are going into the legal world, you will be part of a small solicitors' office, rather than a larger one that you would get in Bristol or London. There is an issue there.

Housing has always been an issue but it has become an acute issue for us in Cornwall over the last three or four months. As a leadership board, we are talking about that with the hospital and with businesses. It is difficult, particularly for people who are coming and doing hospitality or agriculture, to even find rented accommodation. We are not even talking about housing that they can buy.

One of the issues that you will hear about clearly in Cornwall is that finding affordable housing is difficult. We are working very hard at increasing the amount of housing, but, as you said, there are people who have second homes or have been renting homes and have now realised that, financially, it would be better for them to put them into holiday lets because of the amount of money that they will gain. Some of that money remains in Cornwall and some does not, but goes to other places.

Housing is absolutely an issue and will become more of an acute issue for us. We are looking at how we address that across the leadership system, but we do not have all the answers yet.

We are finding ways to ensure that we have a link through from young people into the skills that are required. There is a need for more emphasis on the importance of vocational careers and training. We do a lot of work around apprenticeships, working with the LEP and, as Cornwall Council, as a place leader, making sure that we are having those conversations with our small-to-medium enterprises about apprenticeships. Our health partners are very good at apprenticeships; we have an apprenticeship-first approach. Again, that is not just about young people but all ages. There are things that we are doing about it, but it is a reality.

For me as director of children's services, I have an ageing workforce and we are finding it really difficult to recruit younger people. Having said that, we have a really good rate of our care leavers becoming social workers, as an example. Where we are really targeted and focused, it is really good, but there are an awful lot of barriers as well within Cornwall.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: It is very interesting that you make that last point. Very specifically, let us suppose that you are a young person in Mousehole and you want to train as a social worker, a nurse or a computer technician. How far do you have to go in order to access that training? You spoke earlier about the cost and availability of transport in your area. How far do people have to travel for vocational training of that sort, and how costly is it?

Meredith Teasdale: From Mousehole, you would potentially be going to the Camborne campus of Cornwall College, to Truro and Penwith College, or to the campus in Penzance. I suppose it depends on the course that you are doing. Penzance is relatively close to Mousehole but Camborne is a distance away. That would be a decision that you make when you choose which course you do, so that is a barrier in itself.

For vocational courses, there will be a period when you are also with an employer, which could be anywhere in the duchy, so that then creates a real cost. I said at the beginning that, for some of our apprentices, 35% of their wages go on transport and travel, because it is not simple. If you get a car or a scooter, there is the cost of that. Public transport can take a lot of time, as there would be multiple changes. It is a reality.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: If you had to be there by 9 am, what time might you have to leave home at?

Meredith Teasdale: College would be less of an issue because the colleges have a really good process of making sure that they pick up young people, but you might well have to get to the place where the college bus picks you up. It could be a long time, and we are talking about some young people in Wadebridge going to Truro and Penwith College, which is a good hour and a half on the bus, one way. It is when you are then trying to access that employment opportunity that it really

becomes prohibitive and very difficult for some young people, depending on their and their family's circumstances.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: Just for our benefit, given that we need to make some recommendations at the end of this process, we have identified the problem but is there anything obvious that you can see that the Government could do to help make it at least less of a problem? Part of it is just to do with geography but is there anything more that could be done and is not being done?

Meredith Teasdale: This is for both the Government and for us, as local government, but free or highly subsidised on public transport for young people would be really important, although that does not solve the problem. There is also something about whether there are loan schemes for driving lessons and vehicle purchase for young people who cannot get access via public transport, or community car services, a bit like the bikes in London or the scooters in Nottingham. It would have to be around cars in really rural locations, where a scooter or an electric bike is not going to take you the distance that you need to travel. There are some things that we need to look at, particularly for very rural authorities and the additional cost that is there.

Q139 Lord Clarke of Nottingham: It seems to me that one of the themes of this fascinating morning is the bewildering range of providers, initiatives and schemes that we are now providing to the people affected. Our witnesses are extremely familiar with them, as is the committee, after all the evidence we have taken, but it must be very bewildering for a lot of employers, particularly small and medium employers, and certainly for the young people trying to find their way into this maze.

Beginning with employers, do you find that enough of your small and medium employers engage with this system, particularly when we are saying that the level and types of skills that we provide should be employer-led in each region? A lot are very keen. Big employers get very involved in LEPs and so on, but a lot of small and medium-sized employers switch off. You also have investors and prospective new employers who want to know that they will be able to get the skills that they need if they bring the jobs of the future into your area. What works best to get more employers engaged in the system? What can be done to increase the input from those employers who, at the moment, do not participate very much?

What is the best scheme that we have and what is the provider that seems able to contribute best to that? Is it the LEP, the FE colleges, the careers hubs or the people running Kickstart? What can be done to make it all more attractive and accessible to employers, so that they feel confident that they are increasing the number of people with the skills they need?

Michelle Rainbow: You are right; the landscape is really confusing. That is one of the barriers, particularly for small businesses and microbusinesses, to accessing it. My view is that you have to take that pain away. It does not really matter whether it is a chamber, the FSB, a LEP or a provider, it has to be simple and immediately accessible, and it

has to solve some of the challenges that that business is facing. When businesses seek this out, and look for somebody to recruit or to get involved in some way, shape or form, there is usually a bit of pain there. We need to think about what that is, what we are trying to address and how we pull that all together, so that as a region or an area you have one front door. That tends to work, because the fragmented, piecemeal initiative programme is really difficult to access.

Lord Clarke of Nottingham: What is the best front door, in your opinion?

Michelle Rainbow: From our perspective in the north-east, we have a really successful growth hub that enables businesses to access all sorts of support, including skills. The front door is our growth hub. It is about access to finance, business support, Covid relief and skills. The skills bit then leads into my world, at which point we can support those businesses with whatever it is that is causing them pain, how they can get involved and the sorts of things that we can then suggest that might support them. You have a conversation about one thing, which then leads on to asking, "Have you thought about a traineeship or an apprenticeship? Would you come into schools? Would you give support on careers? How can we solve some of those problems? Simultaneously, how can you help us in supporting young people and our education institutions to do that?"

At its most basic level, it is about having those conversations with businesses to try to understand what their requirements are. That is on a micro, one-to-one level, but the system has to understand what the medium to long-term picture looks like as well. There is a role for strategic organisations such as local enterprise partnerships or combined authorities to understand what the bigger picture looks like and what it is going to look like in the medium-term and long-term. The conversations we are having with businesses now are about their immediate pain. What we need to anticipate, so that we do not get this mismatch between skills demand and skills supply, is the medium to longer term and what the world of work is going to look like in five to 10 years and longer. There is a dual aspect to it; both are equally important, but both need to happen.

Meredith Teasdale: I completely agree with Michelle that there are those two elements. Within Cornwall, we have a people hub—that is the problem; in different areas, they are called different things, but it is what Michelle has described as a growth hub. It sits with the LEP, but the process pulls together information from the careers hub and information around growth. Businesses and colleges are part of that conversation. It is about making sure that people see it as the place to go. Are we there yet in Cornwall? No, but we are working really hard to make sure that we get there.

We have good relationships to bring that together. In some places in the country, there can be animosity between different parts of the sector, which then makes it harder and therefore not as successful. Where it works really well, it is about people working together and saying that the people hub is the place to go. That becomes the word of mouth and the way that you communicate that if you want information about getting an

apprenticeship, or if you are concerned about finances or growth, the people hub is the place to go—if you phone them, they will be able to direct you to the right place to get the right information.

That front door is really important. I agree with Michelle that it is about a strategic approach and how we are bringing together the colleges and the businesses, and understanding what it is that is required for the future. Again, we are making sure that that feeds through. For us in Cornwall, we do not have large organisations, so our relationship is with the Federation of Small Businesses, as well as the chamber of commerce. That is really important to us.

Lord Clarke of Nottingham: As far as young people are concerned, they must find this very bewildering, however good the careers guidance they get through the school—although you both agreed that it is getting better than it used to be. What is their best source of real guidance in choosing the right course? Quite a lot of schools still really want most of their pupils to go on to sixth form and A-levels. It is financially quite valuable to the school that they do that, but it is not always the best course for a significant minority of their pupils.

What is the best route that you find attracts young people into the best part of the system, particularly the more difficult ones, who are in danger of becoming NEET and quite difficult to involve, and gets them to understand that they have to start thinking positively about getting a job and a career? What works best for them? Does it all depend on the quality of the guidance they are getting at school, or on whether some provider attracts them into a Kickstart scheme or one of the other schemes that we know of? How successful are they are in reaching the people they need?

Michelle Rainbow: From my perspective, one of the really important things is that career guidance is impartial. That is a key part of the Gatsby benchmarks and the careers strategy. Impartial guidance has to be given to young people, which is personalised and tailored to their need. That is crucial.

Lord Clarke of Nottingham: Who does that best?

Michelle Rainbow: It depends. Within our careers hubs, we have careers guidance professionals who provide that support. A lot of our careers leaders within schools are taking on that role and taking a level 6 qualification that allows them to give that personal, independent guidance. In my view, a school that is really committed to the future of a young person should be giving the opportunity for independent and impartial guidance. That is really crucial.

From our perspective, Covid has allowed us to build our digital resources, so that young people have a place where they can find information about the next steps. We have done an awful lot of virtual guides and tours. We have a lot of employers talking about the journey and progression route into whatever industry they are in. We have had an awful lot of work done over the last 18 months that has really moved this on. For young people in rural locations or who have difficulties with travel, being able to

access or watch some of this gives them, in part, an experience that they would not have had otherwise. So there have been some advantages to some of the developments that have come out of Covid.

My view is that there is no substitute for two things: first, impartial, one-to-one guidance that is tailored to the young person; and, secondly, being able to experience, in person, a business, an FE provider or a university. There is no substitute for that. Go and experience it. Immerse yourself in that for a period and see whether it is the sort of thing that you would want to do. Speak to young people who are on the course or to apprentices who are already doing it. We need to facilitate those conversations.

We have a number of apprentices who start something because their parents, and in some cases their school, think it is the right thing for them to do, and they drop out. What do they do next? Who do they talk to? How do they find their next pathway? Those are the sorts of things that we really need to start addressing. It is that safety net. When they fall in, who is there to catch them and how do we get them back out again?

Meredith Teasdale: I agree with what was said on virtual support. We have been running virtual work experience during Covid-19 for our children who have particular additional needs. As an example, we have personal advisers who work alongside our children in care and support them with getting into employment. We are also looking at how we do that for our children with high-level special educational needs and disabilities.

It is really difficult. In some senses, we are very lucky in Cornwall. We have an outstanding college in Truro and Penwith, and a college that is turning itself around and has really strong vocational courses. The majority of our young people go to one of those colleges. There is always tension in the conversation about whether some schools are giving absolutely independent advice. The Gatsby benchmark supports us with that, but there is always a tension around funding that comes through.

There are always perceptions around whether advice is absolutely independent, but, with the virtual world, it is easier for young people and parents to access more information that perhaps has not been available. It is something that we keep our eye on.

It is really difficult when a family has not been in employment for a period of time. How do you engage with that young person to support them into employment? We have spent a lot of time finding ways to do that, and our partners support us with that as well, but there is no easy answer. It is about having a consistent relationship and working with that young person. It is about a person putting in the time and building that relationship, and whether there is enough money in the system to do that for every young person who is particularly vulnerable, which is not always the case.

Lord Storey: I want to congratulate Michelle on her answer on careers guidance. She just said everything that needed to be said and did it so

well—she talked about the quality of the staff, being face-to-face and impartial, networking and immersion in those opportunities. That is absolutely right. Perhaps one of the benefits from all the virtual work that we are now doing is that when Covid is, we hope, forgotten, one-to-one virtual careers guidance will be something that we keep. It is no good going on a computer programme and putting in all the information to find the job you are supposed to be doing; one-to-one contact with somebody who is really qualified is the best way of doing it.

My question is on something that Michelle mentioned. Often, young people, through family networks and opportunities, are told, “Why don’t you try this? Have you done that?” Families in poorer circumstances do not have those networks or opportunities for young people to trial a potential career. How do we get around that?

Michelle Rainbow: You are quite right; that is one of the challenges. When we were running the pilot for secondary schools, parental engagement was the toughest nut to crack, particularly in some schools in some communities. That is one of the reasons why we are now starting in primary school. Primary parents tend to have a bit more contact with the school. You can engage parents of children at primary age, in every community, and talk to them in the same way that you talk to the students about career opportunities and the types of jobs that are available in an area; starting earlier is a really good way to do that.

Something that we did in secondary schools that worked really well, which was the brainchild of our previous chair, a chap called Andrew Hodgson, was what we used to call a “parent safari”. We would take a sector or industry and work with a particular school or a couple of schools. We would take a coach or a minibus of parents and students to experience a tour. To give you an example, we did it with our offshore energy system. We went to the turbine manufacturers, the installations, the port, the training facilities and the university. We took both the parents and the students on a safari of that particular industry. In our case, it was all the way up the east coast.

The idea was that parents got as much out of it as the young people, and they did. We have some fantastic video evidence that showcases parents and students saying, “I did not know this was here”, “I had no idea that, behind those fences, all this existed”, “I had heard about this but I did not know what was happening”, and “I did not know how I could get in there”.

Whatever we do, we need to think about how we communicate to parents, communities and the wider family network. You have to crack that if you are going to get careers provision right.

Q140 Baroness Newlove: The answers have been absolutely brilliant and full of content, and, to be honest, I am looking for a question I can ask you that is not duplication. It has been very interesting; thank you, ladies.

We have heard about difficulties getting to good employment because of transport, which is a huge problem for young people. It is not necessarily that there is no local transport; it is about how they use the transport. In

previous evidence, we were informed about timetables: a young girl did not know to get an earlier bus, so she was always late. It is about knowledge.

I want to know what the hindrance is to young people finding good-quality employment and accessing a good range of education and training opportunities. With what remedy can we get around this? Would it be employers working with the local buses? They are not going to look if there is no remedy to make sure that they can get to good-quality jobs.

Meredith Teasdale: It is about working across the system, making sure that we are having the right conversations at the strategic level. It is also about supporting the family and the young person. I will use our care leavers as an example. We would work intensively with a young person around how they are getting to work, the appropriate things to wear for an interview, and the appropriate things to do. We would support them in the same way that I support my 18-year-old at the moment to find a job. It is about giving that overarching support, but we cannot do that for every child. So it is about making sure that we have clear guidance in our people hub and the information about what things you should be looking for.

We do know that, sometimes, young people have not been using public transport. This has been an issue during the pandemic, where we have, at different points, said, "Don't use public transport". There is anxiety and we recognise that. We are now seeing that we are having to do some additional work with our young people, on how to read a bus timetable and how to change their way of thinking.

We are acutely aware of this and working on it. We are identifying those young people who need additional support. Careers South West and our different organisations are supporting us in doing that, which means that we have a relatively low level of NEETs in Cornwall. It is about that intensive relationship and that work, as well as giving universal information for all young people and families, just to make them think about how they access job opportunities. I hope that answers your question.

Baroness Newlove: I appreciate that, given the funding, we cannot interact with every family. If we flip that on the other side, how do we make sure that everybody can access the information that we are talking about in a language that they understand? I appreciate that Manchester is completely different. Cornwall is absolutely gorgeous—I am not saying that Manchester is not, but it is a different dialogue that we are having. I remember working with a group of young girls from Moss Side. They would not go outside of Manchester, partly because of racism but also because they did not have the confidence to get on a bus to go outside the area.

There is always a presumption and we put young people in groups. Some people look adequate and like they know what they are doing. We found in other evidence about careers guidance that, if you knew what you wanted to do, you were left alone, but that should not be how it is. We should treat them equally and not put them in boxes.

For me, it is about how we make sure that all the messaging you talk about in your work, as we do, gets to people so that they can pick this up. I am just concerned that all this information seems to go round internally. The communications for young people to pick up—on the internet or wherever—should be accessible at a time when they are comfortable to look at it on their own, not with their peers.

Meredith Teasdale: In Cornwall, the pastoral work that our colleges do to support young people in accessing job opportunities and having the information that they require is really good. That is part of our success in making sure that we have a small percentage of young people who are NEET. That is really important. The pastoral support that our colleges and schools provide to young people and their families gives universal support and also helps identify the young people who need additional support. The statutory services then pick up some of those young people who need even more support. There is a way of doing that and we are successful at doing that in Cornwall.

Michelle Rainbow: I had a conversation with a couple of organisations very recently. I talked before about where the safety net is. We have systems in place. People progress along a system, but if they fall through the cracks, where is the safety net? It is really important to recognise that.

There are also occasions when young people cite transport as a barrier, when there are other things that we probably need to unpick. I completely agree that self-confidence, self-belief and being able to set foot in a college or a training provider is often a huge barrier to a young person. We tend to make assumptions that, just because they know about it, they are going to go and do it.

We work very closely with organisations across the north-east that work with young people in that sort of scenario. It is about working out what the problem is. Young people may say it is one thing but, underneath, it may be something different. It is about building confidence, allowing them to try things and occasionally to fail—that is okay—building them back up and giving them other options.

Low aspirations are very difficult to turn around. If you get to the age of 18 or 19 and your experience has not been great, trying to crack that is really difficult. You have to do it in small steps. The programmes that we see coming out on a national basis tend to be a bit broad-brush. We need to bring it back and think about that young person, and how we are supporting them and their specific needs. Once you do that, you can get them to make those small steps. And it is small steps: they are not going to go from here to there in a matter of weeks; that is not going to happen. It is a case of working with them in incremental steps and ensuring that you address the needs of each young person.

The Chair: Thank you, everybody, for this evidence session. I am now going to draw it to a close. Michelle and Meredith, thank you very much indeed on behalf of the committee for all the evidence that you have given so clearly this morning, for the time that you have spent in preparing, and for your written submissions to the committee. We are

very grateful to you for that.

We are still taking evidence until the end of July and will be updating bits of evidence over the summer, into September. We will produce a report for the House towards the end of November; that is our deadline. If there is anything that occurs over the next few weeks that you think we ought to be alerted to, please feel free to write to the secretariat to draw our attention to it. Indeed, if, after we close this session, you suddenly think of something you should have mentioned, we are very happy to have that in writing. On behalf of the committee, I thank you very much indeed for the time you have given to us.