

UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN – WRITTEN EVIDENCE (YUN0013)

Youth Unemployment Committee Inquiry

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**Following Young Fathers Further (UK Research & Innovation),
University of Lincoln**

Anna Tarrant, Linzi Ladlow and Laura Way comprise a team of funded¹ academic social science researchers at the University of Lincoln. They are currently conducting research about the parenting journeys and support needs of young parents (aged 25 and under), with a specific focus on young fathers. They have a collective expertise about young parenthood and are working directly with young parents and voluntary, community and statutory services that engage with young people across their parenting journeys, to cocreate more effective, evidence informed interventionsⁱ.

This submission specifically addresses questions 1, 4 and 13 of the inquiry.

1. Summary

1.1 Young parents (aged 25 and under) are an under-represented and seldom heard group in policy interventions designed to alleviate the causes and impacts of youth employment. Yet young people with childcare responsibilities are more likely to be challenged in accessing the labour market and disadvantaged by complex education, labour market and welfare systems.

1.2 Those from poor socio-economic backgrounds are faced with a variety of obstacles and structural challenges that limit their opportunities to access the labour market and secure employment.

¹ Following Young Fathers Further is a four-year qualitative longitudinal research study funded £1.2 million (2020-2024) by the flagship UK Research & Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship scheme. The study explores the parenting journeys; education, employment and training trajectories; and support needs of young fathers (aged 25 and under).

Young parents may be challenged in entering the labour market by any combination of lengthy gaps between their education and employment, inflexible and unaffordable local childcare, punitive welfare systems, low minimum wage and poor employment prospects and opportunities in localities.

- 1.3 Because of these structural barriers, young parents are more likely to be NEET (not in education, employment and training) and therefore constrained in pursuing employment by both their youth and lack of education, employment and training skills and opportunities.
- 1.4 Young parenthood is not the cause of un- or under-employment and associated economic and social deprivation. Rather pre-existing socio-economic circumstances like an insecure youth labour market and reduced welfare entitlementsⁱⁱ, exacerbate the challenges of raising children, creating hardship.
- 1.5 Employment figures among young parents are not routinely generated so it is unclear how many young people who are un- and under-employed also have caring responsibilities.
- 1.6 Policy attention to 'demand side' issues around employment (i.e., the availability of employment) should be prioritised over current emphasis on 'supply side' issues (i.e., the willingness, or presumed unwillingness, of unemployed people to take up paid work)ⁱⁱⁱ.
- 1.7 Coproduction, a method that involves creating services in a way that is informed directly by the voices of frontline professionals and young parents, is a valuable yet under-utilised approach for developing more effective employment services tailored to the needs of young people^{ivv}.

2. Evidence

Question 1. What are the main challenges facing young people seeking employment today? How do structural factors impact youth unemployment, and how might these be addressed?

- 2.1 Young people have strong aspirations for accessing secure employment. These aspirations are often heightened after becoming a parent. However, young parents face the additional challenge of navigating inflexible and expensive childcare systems and their care

responsibilities are not routinely recognised or accommodated by employers or employment and welfare agencies.

- 2.2 Qualitative Longitudinal research illustrates that youth EET and NEET trajectories (i.e., either being in or out of work) are not static. Young people experience 'patchwork careers'^{vi}, characterized by a churn of un- and under-employment that produces trajectories that are often fragmented and difficult to navigate. This creates precarity that makes it challenging to find secure, long term and meaningful work. These patterns are reflective of wider contemporary EET opportunities and reflect the experiences of disadvantaged young people more generally^{vii}.
- 2.3 Low educational attainment and employer requirements for work experience impact on access to the labour market for young people. This can be exacerbated for young parents who take time out of education and employment as part of parental leave^{viii}.
- 2.4. Due to a lack of resourcing and financial support, young people often take low-paid, low-status or commission-based jobs with long or inflexible hours. These are perceived as the better option when compared to engaging in apprenticeships or training that is either high cost or carries limited access to financial support^{ix}. Disadvantaged young parents are often under pressure to provide financially in the present and are less able to train or work towards long term career goals.
- 2.5 The increased conditionality of benefits is problematic for young people with care responsibilities and the threat of sanctions can destabilise the fragile lives of disadvantaged young parents, leading to mental and physical health problems^x. Punitive welfare systems that require young parents to work full-time regardless of their caring responsibilities also work against employment and training opportunities that are offered on a part-time and flexible basis².
- 2.6. There are gendered differences in the (N)EET trajectories of young parents. Young mothers, who are most often the parent with primary caring responsibilities, receive limited support and have the fewest options to pursue education and employment aspirations. Mothers face greater disruption and often an extended pause in their EET pathway.

² These points are made in the accompanying video featuring Will of the [North East Young Dads and Lads](#).

For young fathers, employment is considered an important aspect of a fatherhood identity. A breadwinner role can provide a source of meaning and fulfilment. It is an important marker of their commitment to their child and a motivation to improve their life chances.

2.7 The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges that young parents were already facing in sustaining low-paid, inflexible and insecure employment. For young parents this is heightened by the need to negotiate the expectations of employers, unaffordable childcare and complex household work-care arrangements. The pandemic has also created greater insecurity through furlough and redundancy^{xi}.

Question 4. Is funding for education, training and skills enough to meet the needs of young people and of the labour market? How can we ensure it continues to reach those who need it most?

2.8 Young parents, who are most likely to experience disrupted and prolonged gaps between education and employment have very limited access to funding to engage in training or apprenticeships.

2.9 Access to the *Care to Learn*^{xii} fund currently ends at age 20 and free Further Education is rarely available beyond age 19. Many young parents may seek to return to education when their child or children are older, at which point they are often no longer eligible.

2.10 In relation to apprenticeships, 'Care to Learn' funding generally does not apply to young fathers which excludes them from those opportunities and often pushes them towards insecure, low-paid or commission-based employment. Young fathers are only eligible for 'Care to Learn' funding if they have the main caring responsibility for their child. In practice, this means that young fathers rarely apply. This is compounded by a lack of financial support and by those working on the NEET agenda, who do not routinely ask if young men are fathers^{xiii}.

2.11 Lack of financial support to pursue apprenticeships is an additional driver of young parents into precarious fixed term, low-paid or commission-based employment.

Question 13. How might future youth labour market interventions best be targeted towards particular groups, sectors or regions? Which ones should be targeted?

- 2.12 Young parents should be a key target group for future labour market interventions. Both parents and children have better outcomes when they have access to stable and fulfilling employment and a secure home.
- 2.13 Flexible and free access to IT resources via libraries, job shops or specialist support services is essential for those who are unemployed, especially in a context where a substantial minority of low-income benefit claimants do not have computers at home and are required to make benefits claims and conduct job searches online. During the pandemic, specialist and family support services usefully provided free access to devices to reduce gaps in support and also provided equipment for school children.
- 2.14 Third, voluntary sector and community-based organisations designed to support young parents play a key, yet often unrecognised role in supporting young people into employment and Higher Education and both support them to identify and apply for jobs. Service support may also enable young people to gain employability skills when opportunities have been missed through education and training routes.
- 2.15 Sustainable and targeted funding for family support services in all regions of the UK is not currently available. Yet these organisations are well placed to address education and employment gaps. With the right resource, these services can more effectively support young parents to gain employability skills that enable them to access the labour market and/or higher education ^{xiv}.
- 2.16 Support services apply for their funding in an increasingly competitive market and often have to provide flexible and holistic support with limited financial resource. This has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Recommendations for policy and practice

- 3.1 Because data is not routinely collected and analysed, it is unclear how many unemployed young people are also parents. Professionals working on the NEET agenda rarely ask young people if they are parents either. Routinely gathering this information would enable more tailored support for young parents. (Q13)
- 3.2 Policy makers and employers should consider the specific challenges that young parents face in managing their childcare responsibilities alongside employment and enable flexibility around working hours where possible. Focused investment in the employment pathways of

young parents, alongside the provision of an adequate minimum wage and affordable, flexible child care provision are important structural building blocks. (Q13)

- 3.3 Tailored professional support, provided earlier in the life course and sustained through the critical years of education and into training, is essential. This will especially benefit vulnerable and low-skilled young parents.
- 3.4 Greater consideration should be given to young mothers and fathers in education settings. Young fathers are not being uniformly engaged in education contexts and there is little consideration of the experiences of young fathers in education, apprenticeships and Higher Education. Routine questions about parental status should be asked when young parents, including fathers, take on apprenticeships. (Q13)
- 3.5 Adequate funding that enables access to free IT resources in libraries, community centres, job shops or specialist support services is essential to enable young people to access social security and conduct job searches (Q4, Q13).
- 3.6 Young mothers would benefit from greater accommodation of their caring responsibilities in education settings, through increased flexibility of studying, increased access to financial resources and support during periods of maternity leave. (Q13, Q4)
- 3.7 Young parents, who may wish to re-enter education or training much later, following the birth of their child, would benefit from 'Care to Learn' funding to access apprenticeships regardless of their parental status as primary or secondary caregiver.
- 3.8 Methods of co-production that both include and directly respond to the lived experiences and expertise of frontline professionals and young parents are powerful yet under-utilised approaches for developing effective employment services. Evidence-based models like the '[Young Dads Collective](#)' provide a useful footprint for how services might adapt their offer to increase the employability of young parents.

References

ⁱ A video featuring Will from the [North East Young Dads and Lads](#) project has been submitted alongside this written submission. Will shares his experience of trying to balance his childcare responsibilities with employment and the requirements of the Job Centre.

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