



**In Work, Better Off**

**Department Of Work and Pensions**

**British Youth Council response**

**Wednesday 31st October 2007**

**The British Youth Council** (BYC) is the national youth council of the United Kingdom. We represent a unique coalition of young people who've joined together through national, regional and/or local youth organisations. Our membership and network numbers includes over 170 organisations and 400 youth councils. BYC promotes the active citizenship of young people and works to ensure that they are more involved in decisions about their lives.

We aim to do four things:

- Provide a voice for young people;
- Promote equality for young people;
- Help young people be more involved in decisions that affect their lives;
- Advance young people's participation in society and civil life.

We bring young people together to agree on issues of common concern and encourage them to bring about change through taking collective action.

BYC is run by young people for young people. Young people shape our work at all levels through participation in our projects, and regular consultations on policy. Young people also control our governance as a member of BYC's board of 13 annually elected trustees all between the ages of 18 and 24.

**BYC encourages young people to become engaged and active through a number of mechanisms:**

**Publications:** BYC produces a range of publications to help youth organisations realise their plans for development.

**Supporting youth councils:** BYC also actively promotes local youth councils as a model for young people to come together to discuss issues that are important to them and to use their collective resources to lobby effectively for local action.

**Policy and Parliament:** BYC facilitates young people's involvement in national governance through regular consultations that feed into the Westminster policy making process.

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### **Key Points**

- **BYC believes that in order to develop the most efficient and targeted policy the government needs to involve young people in the decision making process.**
- **BYC would stress the vulnerability of young parents being encouraged back into employment when low minimum wage rates will fail to lift them out of poverty.**
- **We support any attempts to tackle discrimination in the workplace.**
- **BYC opposes the introduction of compulsory participation in education until the age of 18 as a means of combating NEET statistics**

The intention which underpins the *'In Work, Better Off'* green paper is welcomed by the British Youth Council. However, we do question some of the means by which the government seeks to achieve this goal, and this response shall highlight some of our chief areas of concern.

### **Young People Should be Involved in Formulating Policy which Affects Them**

BYC believes that a fundamental prerequisite for the success of any legislation concerning young people is for young people to be consulted throughout its development and implementation. At a recent stakeholder meeting facilitated by DWP officials, it became apparent that young people have not been directly consulted in drafting these proposals<sup>1</sup>. We believe that this will inevitably result in a piece of legislation which is less targeted and therefore less effective. Several youth organisations including some of BYC's members, Fairbridge, and the Foyer Federation are ideally placed to facilitate direct consultation events with young people in partnership with the Department of Work and Pensions and we would urge the government to pursue this.

### **Education, National Minimum Wage and Apprenticeships**

We believe compelling student participation in education for those who do not want to participate seems counter-productive. We believe that this will simply

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<sup>1</sup> Flexible New Deal Workshop, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2007

delay, rather than solve the problem of unemployment at a huge cost to the taxpayer. Moreover, the legislation is not wide enough to account for the informal participation offered by the third sector as a real alternative enjoyed by some disengaged young people.

Though the proposed legislation would force young people into education for two more years, and thus they would have far longer to obtain level two qualifications. This does not guarantee they will obtain what is perceived to be a 'good' standard of qualification i.e. 5 A\*- C grades. Rather than reforming the post-16 education system we would strongly recommend that the government conduct a comprehensive review of the current pre-16 system in full consultation with young people in order to ensure a larger proportion of students achieve a level 2 qualification by age 16. We are also gravely concerned that the legislation on compulsory participation in education will create an additional problem in that employers of 16 and 17 year olds on training and apprenticeship schemes will be exempt from minimum wage regulations as is currently the case. We are concerned that 16 and 17 year olds forced into apprenticeships by the new legislation may suffer serious financial hardship. We appreciate these are primarily matters for Department of Children, Schools and Families and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform respectively. However, we urge you to work collaboratively in finding a solution to these problems.

BYC strongly recommends that young people both inside and outside of education are supported by the introduction of an equal minimum wage for everyone aged 16 and over. A significant number of young people currently on Job-Seekers allowance may therefore be encouraged into the workplace. The introduction of an equal minimum wage will send out a clear message that young people have equal worth within society. And this positive step will go a huge way toward tackling negative stereotypes and issues created by low self esteem which is recognised as a problem in the government's new Ten Year Youth Strategy<sup>2</sup>. An equal minimum wage will also give young people a sense of independence and purpose which are crucial to motivate those who regard themselves as ostracised within society.

### **Further Support that should be Provided to Help Lone Parents into Work**

BYC agrees that lone parents should not be coerced into accepting work which would give them less pay than they would receive on benefits. BYC would point out that this is a particular danger for young parents who are aged under 22 and thus would receive a lower minimum wage than their older counterparts. The Minimum wage for 16-21 year olds is certainly not a living wage and a young parent would struggle to support a child on it. One young mother, Emily, commented that *'It is a constant struggle'*. In addition, BYC believes that

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<sup>2</sup> Aiming high for young people: a Ten Year Strategy for Positive Activities July 2007

confidence building and interpersonal skills are crucial for success within the work place and to ensure that young parents are work ready in the first place. The government should build these types of programme through consultation with young parents.

### **Ethnic Minorities Remain at a Disadvantage in the Work Place**

BYC also commends the attempts to tackle the discrimination against ethnic minorities. We see creating a diverse and integrated work force as an essential means to improve community and personal relations and tackle negative typecasting. However, we believe discrimination against younger people is an ongoing issue which needs to be addressed too. We believe that introducing an equal minimum wage is a key step in reducing negative youth stereotypes and we would urge the DWP to work together with DBERR and the Low Pay Commission on this.

### **Conclusion**

We would conclude that the main flaw in the government proposals remains their failure to consult with young people on the areas of policy which are relevant to them. It is not worth engineering a new strategy for encouraging young people into the work place if the primary beneficiaries have not been consulted. As it stands we believe the DWP plans will result in less applicable and effective policy. We would reiterate that we are strongly against raising the compulsory education and training leaving age as a way of reducing 'NEET' statistics. Whilst we are not against young people remaining in education post-16 we strongly believe it is a matter of individual choice. We would also urge the DWP to work with DCSF and DBERR in finding a solution to the National Minimum Wage and apprenticeships issue; as it stands regarding the educational reforms young people are in danger of being forced further into poverty.