

Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee

COVID-19 inquiry

Focus group with young people – rural

Held remotely on Microsoft Teams

25 November 2020

Colin Beattie MSP and Willie Coffey MSP attended, alongside a number of young people from rural areas. They included people still at school, seeking employment and at university.

Transport

Some opportunities are currently available to do work experience; however public transport is not great in some rural areas (i.e. infrequent and at inconvenient times). One focus group member was waiting to sit a driving test which has been delayed due to COVID-19. She felt that people need their own transport in rural areas.

Work based learning

One participant spoke of a local trial in the Highlands of work-based learning and inclusive apprenticeships; along with employers. The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) has passed a motion that every school pupil should have access to work based learning.

This involves building working partnerships with the local community to encourage more people to stay in the area and contribute to the local economy; COVID-19 has had a 'massive impact' on that and stopped employers from wanting to engage with the schools in the area. Work based learning is a very effective system if it could be put in place in all rural areas.

Gaining qualifications after leaving school

Support is needed for young people who leave school or college and have no positive destination or leave school without qualifications and want to go back to school later to do their exams. This is not possible at the moment so greater support is needed to make that happen. If young people leave school early there is no pathway for them to make up for that; they can't get into employment or training.

Advertising vacancies

In the Borders, many jobs are found by word of mouth as opposed to being advertised; this should be addressed. This could be addressed by creating local job vacancy apps.

Employers should be encouraged to advertise positions more; one idea is to support smaller businesses with wage incentives for taking on young people who are leaving school without qualifications and are competing with more qualified people.

Work experience

It is currently difficult to find opportunities for work experience for young people on their chosen career paths. However, some positives have arisen as a result of the pandemic: many people are working from home so there are more opportunities in the more rural areas. Due to technology, people are able to work from home more.

Impact on employment

In the Western Isles, many employers are not willing to accept CVs; mostly they say that they're not taking on any young people. This has got become more of a problem due to COVID-19; employers are less willing to put forward opportunities for young people.

Apprenticeships

For those at university, some kind of direct relationship between the course and the employer would be helpful, so that graduates know what they want to do next.

Careers information

Young people should be given information about jobs for the future, such as robotics and artificial intelligence, etc. There is a need to make people more aware of the opportunities out there; some are well known, such as medicine, law – but many young people aren't aware of the other routes they can take.

Work based learning is available at school and young people get information on opportunities at that point; however, this is only available from s4 onwards and this information should be made available earlier.

Some participants had received no input from the school; they believed that it would be beneficial to highlight options and different paths available to school students.

One participant said that there is little support in the Highlands for people who don't want to go to university; in areas of deprivation it's more challenging to find employment too.

Courses such as 'Breaking Barriers' with ENABLE Works is a partnership between ENABLE Works and Strathclyde University for people with disabilities to gain an award at a higher education establishment and complete a work placement with Scottish Power; it's a first of its kind but due to COVID-19 the next cohort is being delivered nationally and remotely; so the scope is there for universities and employers to offer opportunities during the pandemic.

It is important to look at the green recovery and jobs to help with climate change. There could be more of an emphasis on addressing skills shortages into information for young people on career paths etc.

Connectivity

Some participants said that broadband needs to be improved; it can be 'very hit and miss in rural areas especially at different times of day'. Some young people had to schedule working online along with other family members as the internet connection wouldn't support 3 people working at once. Broadband accessibility can also be a cost issue for people living in deprivation.

SYP looked at rural communities and their opportunities to participate in education and employment; they passed a motion that superfast wi-fi is 'non-existent in rural areas' and this is impacting on young people.

Mental health issues

Mental Health is a big issue. Employers need to be understanding of people who are suffering; there should be training in place for employers, and the Scottish Government.

Cost of living

Young people who have moved out of the family home are paying the same bills as others; young people who are 16 years old should have their minimum wage increased.

Engaging with young people

Social media is the main platform for engaging with young people. Digital careers fairs could be organised for rural districts as well as scheduled talks from employers.