

**Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee**  
**COVID-19 inquiry – focus group with young people**  
**Note of focus group – 14 September (on Microsoft Teams)**

**Background**

On 14 September, the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee held a focus group to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on young people.

The focus group was attended by Committee Members: Gordon Lindhurst MSP, Convener, Willie Coffey MSP, Deputy Convener and Colin Beattie MSP.

Participants were: Callum Nimmo (Scottish Youth Parliament), Brooke Barr (Scottish Youth Parliament), Kyle Galbraith (Princes Trust), Katie Stewart (Princes Trust), Kerry Spence (Orkney CLD), Ramandeep Kaur (Young Women Lead), Lauryn Mwale (Young Women Lead), Andy Tait (Orkney Employability), Ben Johnson (Scaffolding apprentice)

**Impact of COVID-19 on the participants?**

Callum Nimmo, Convener of Jobs, Economy and FW Committee at SYP, explained that he is a university student who works part-time with a small business. He said that he has been 'quite severely' affected by COVID-19 – university has started back later this year and is operating a hybrid model with students only in university one day per week. Callum was also furloughed for a couple of months on 80% wages. He thinks that he would have been made redundant without the furlough scheme so he's grateful for that.

Lauryn Mwale used to work part-time in the university alumni call centre but that job has been scrapped for now due to COVID-19 so she is looking elsewhere for work. Whilst previously certain part-time jobs (e.g. waitress, coffee shop work) would be available to young people, they are now competing with other, older, more experienced people for these jobs. The competition for this type of part-time work has impacted on Lauryn.

Kyle Galbraith currently works at Marks and Spencer; he was supported into that job by the Princes Trust. Kyle has worked throughout the pandemic but most of the workers at the store were furloughed. Those who continued working were paid an extra 15% as an additional bonus. A couple of people have had to leave the business to find more hours (as hours have been cut for some workers in response to COVID-19). Marks and Spencer are making 7,000 redundancies this year so Kyle's job is currently at risk as he's a newer employee and one of the less trained. COVID-19 has deprived him of opportunities to be trained as a lot of the managers who would normally provide the training have been furloughed.

Ben Johnson has had a positive experience of the furlough scheme. Ben still has his apprenticeship but his plans have been pushed back to next April; he was hoping to go to university this year but has to complete his apprenticeship first (which has been delayed due to COVID-19) so he'll have to go to university next year instead.

**What opportunities are available? What can be done? How can employers help? How can we encourage employers to continue their recruitment of young people?**

Callum Nimmo said that a lot of young people are finding securing work after university challenging. He was involved in passing a motion in the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) stating that apprenticeship wages should be increased. The SYP Committee felt that this measure might attract people into apprenticeships and balance the numbers going to university to diversify the avenues pursued by young people.

Andy Tait is employed by Restart Orkney (which is funded by Community Jobs Scotland). His job was meant to end in the middle of August but Andy got a 3 month extension and full pay throughout lockdown. In Orkney, there are not many jobs available at the moment; it is difficult to find jobs in the local area.

Ramandeep (Raman) Kaur works in investment banking. Raman said that this is a difficult industry to get into for women and people from BAME communities; however, there are a lot of programmes being offered to support employers in this area. Raman said that employers in her industry felt that they didn't have much support to make initial contact with schools and colleges. Raman's school did a work experience programme; Raman got into the industry through a placement with the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS). However, RBS was the only bank taking part in that programme. Raman said that the link between schools and employers should be looked at.

Katie Stewart of the Princes Trust described a 'real hesitancy' from employers at the moment due to current uncertainty. Kerry mentioned uncertainty around Christmas retail recruitment which will have an impact on young people. Kerry thinks that Government schemes such as Kickstart and the Youth Guarantee will help but she is not sure that it'll be right for all young people, (e.g. the Kickstart scheme is capped at 25 hours). Kerry said that the Committee should look beyond Kickstart and Youth Guarantee to help even more young people and seek to involve a broad spectrum of sectors (such as finance).

### **Has the increased use of technology to communicate been beneficial?**

Raman said that increased use of technology to communicate has made life easier for some; she spoke of friends who have accessed jobs which they are able to do from home, avoiding the need to re-locate or commute.

Kerry highlighted that a lot of people doing employability funded courses have to do work experience in order to complete the course. Kerry thinks that there needs to be innovation to make sure that young people get opportunities and virtual work experience.

Lauryn applied for internships and work experience for the summer break. Some companies were offering virtual and paid opportunities; other opportunities were unpaid. Some companies offered 3 days of panel sessions and activities; however, this is not an experience that young people can put on their CVs as actual work experience.

### **Sources of information – where are young people looking for information/guidelines?**

Brooke Barr (Deputy Convener of the SYP Jobs, Economy and Fair Work Committee) said that Youth Scotland produced useful information. Ben's employer and parents kept him informed. Raman found government sources to be very confusing. She mainly used the daily briefing but found that the information on the

Scottish Government website wasn't very accessible (especially around the re-opening of religious places). Callum's university was good at providing information but the pace of information slowed down from weekly to monthly. Brooke is currently in the last year of school; she felt that school was 'awful' at giving support (although they did give out work and assignments) but limited information was made available on what was happening with exams, etc.

Kyle said that Marks and Spencer was constantly in contact with government so they got up-to-date guidelines. The store Kyle works in had to completely change processes in the store to meet the guidelines; this was a big change which was relatively difficult to adapt to and changes are still ongoing.

Raman's parents run a small convenience store and found it difficult to make the required changes to meet the guidelines; they had to put screens up round the tills (a big thing for a small business to organise). Kaman's family business did take advantage of a government grant but received no hands-on help (e.g. where to go to get screens and PPE, etc). Raman said that there should be more consideration given to practical assistance for small businesses.

Andy works in a furniture shop; they put a one-way system in place in the shop . They collect second-hand furniture but couldn't operate the van with 2 people and they have to wait 3 days before putting a donation into the shop due to the 72 hour restrictions in place.

**Have young people used this time to gain new skills? What can be done to help with skills? What is needed to most to help young people get into employment?**

Callum is studying computer science; a lot of employers in this area are looking for a degree and experience too. Callum's university has been giving students a chance to gain experience with employers whilst gaining credits for their course. Often this opportunity is unpaid; if this was incentivised more students are likely sign up for it. Callum said that it is very difficult for some students to build up relevant experience whilst doing their course.

Andy said that there are not many major companies up in Orkney; the two big employers are the Council and the NHS. The remote location can be an issue.

Ben is doing an apprenticeship; he got qualifications at school (including highers) but has found that the apprenticeship course work is more academic than some higher level work. Ben said that older colleagues didn't have to do so much coursework. Ben felt that more practically minded young people might struggle to do the coursework; those who aren't so academically minded might miss out on the opportunity to do an apprenticeship.

Raman said that in the finance industry there is a big focus on having a 2:1 grade from university to access the industry. Raman felt that it would be helpful to have apprenticeship programmes which offered opportunities to work whilst training JP Morgan does a programme for apprentices. This is fully paid and Raman believes that this is a good model.

Kerry said that many young people move away from Orkney and believes that the area has to do something to attract people back into good jobs (such as offering graduate apprenticeships). Many people rely on the tourist industry in Orkney. This year many young people have been unable to secure a summer job and their whole

life future has been changed by this; they've had to defer entry to university as they didn't get enough money in the summer to fund their studies.

Ben said that many young people are still on furlough; there is a concern that many skilled tradesmen will be available if made redundant and competing with young people for jobs .

Andy said that Community Job Scotland (CJS) was fantastic; this should continue to be funded. Andy got a 12 month contract thorough CJS (extended to 15 months).

Kerry made a plea for government employment schemes to take the Highlands and Islands into account (e.g. the Kickstart scheme requires 30 placements which is 'huge' for Orkney and challenging to meet).