

Participation of Women in the Labour Market in Leicester: Qualitative Follow-up Study



Acknowledgements

This research was dependent on the help and assistance of a number of individuals and organisations without whom the study could not have been completed. Special thanks must go to the women of Leicester who found the time to talk to us and answer our questions in an open and honest manner. We hope that we have been able to accurately reflect their experiences and needs in this report. We are particularly indebted to the staff of the network of Multi Access Centres (MACs) within Leicester who provided valuable support to the research. We are also grateful to the ongoing advice and support of the project advisory group: Niloofar Sarkari, Joelle Bradly and Caroline Boucher. Thanks also to Emma Smith and Sarah Ward for invaluable administrative support throughout the project.

We would like to make it clear that this report is based on research undertaken by the authors and the analysis and comment therein does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership. The authors take responsibility for any inaccuracies or omissions in the text.

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Summary

About the research

- This research was commissioned as a follow-up to a previous *quantitative* study, completed by CRESR in 2010, which profiled the characteristics and context of workless women in Leicester and the surrounding Leicestershire sub-region. This second study complements these statistical findings through a more in-depth exploration of the main factors associated with low rates of female labour market engagement within the city.
- It provides an understanding of the situations and experiences of women in Leicester and reports on their perspectives, aspirations and attitudes towards work.
- It presents evidence from six focus groups with women in Leicester, which engaged a total of 24 women who were currently unemployed or out of the labour market altogether. Follow-up in-depth interviews were also conducted with a sub-set of ten women participating in the focus groups.

Experience and work histories

- The vast majority of women had some experience of work, predominantly within the Leicester area, although the nature and extent of this experience varied significantly. Though there were a few exceptions, previous occupations were generally in low-paid sectors and occupations.
- As might be expected many respondents reported experience of working in the textiles, hosiery and footwear industries, which had previously been such large employers in Leicester. This was particularly true of Indian women taking part in the research.
- A key issue for many women was the need to re-train and gain qualifications in order to access sectors in which there were more employment opportunities.

Attitudes towards employment

- Attitudes towards work were shaped by a range of factors including household circumstances, parental responsibilities, skills and qualifications, past work experience and employment aspirations. In the main, the desire to work is strong but it is possible to discern two distinct attitudes towards employment from the data analysis.
- One group of women were struggling to make ends meet when having to get by on benefits income. As a result their need for employment had become pressing, to the extent that usual occupations and aspirations were foregone.
- For a second, younger group of women with small children there was often less urgency to find work due to an awareness of the need to gain qualifications and engage in

training. Women in this group had less work experience and were relatively less qualified and, as a result, their aspirations were more medium term with acknowledgement of the time they needed to invest in education and training.

Training, qualifications and employment support

- Respondents were relatively engaged in terms of preparing themselves for work and to compete in a difficult labour market. Some women were acutely aware of the fact that their limited educational attainment and qualifications were a significant barrier to obtaining work. In this respect training and education were seen as key to accessing the labour market
- The three most prominent sources of service provision and support cited in relation to employment were Jobcentre Plus, MACs and *Nextstep*
- Local provision of employment services and support were very well received by most women involved in the research and this should be consolidated and harnessed so as to maintain this positive engagement. Providers such as *Nextstep* and the network of MAC centres in Leicester are currently providing invaluable services in this area to many women in the City.
- There was widespread view that the conditionality attached to receipt of some benefits (especially Jobseekers Allowance) was sometimes counterproductive, as women had to look for and apply for a certain amount of jobs with little interest or hope of securing them.

Barriers to work

- There was a definite sense of pessimism about the **current jobs market** with women describing the situation as "discouraging" and "disheartening".
- **Limited qualifications and experience** were a common barrier among participants and experiences had prompted many to (re-)engage in training and education.
- **Balancing caring responsibilities with work** was seen as a particular challenge and not always possible. Given the relatively high proportion of single parents included within the research this issue often figured prominently in focus groups and interviews.
- **Transport** was considered prohibitive in terms of both time and expense. The majority of respondents would prefer work in their local area if possible, but there was a realistic acknowledgement that this was difficult to achieve.
- A number of research participants spoke of their experiences of **discrimination** in relation to employment. This related to **religion, ethnicity and age**. Perceptions and experiences of discrimination also had a bearing on which areas of the Leicester area some ethnic minority women would be prepared to work.

Knowledge of changes to the benefits system

- Understanding and awareness of the changes to the benefits regime is clearly something which women need more information and advice on in order to prepare for any detrimental changes to their circumstances

Cultural and ethnic diversity

- Asked about the relatively low female economic activity rate in Leicester, many ethnic minority respondents cited the ethnic and cultural diversity of Leicester as a key issue in explaining this.
- A key factor shaping orientations towards work among *some* women from ethnic minority backgrounds was said to be the traditional gendered division of labour. These trends were also said to be changing however among second and third generation Indian women, and also among Muslim women.
- Respondents stressed that it was important to recognise the diversity of attitudes both within and across different ethnic minority groups and nationalities - different communities and families have different perspectives.
- Research participants from ethnic minority backgrounds had a very good command of the English language and consequently did not cite this as a particular barrier to themselves. This was discussed as a barrier however, in the context of other women in their respective communities.

Recommendations

- There is a need for more locally based and well informed careers advice which builds upon the existing and successful services in Leicester. Advice and guidance should also seek to raise employment aspirations where relevant, and not simply push people towards any job.
- Careers advice also needs to consider the dynamics of the local labour market in Leicester. This needs to be balanced alongside individual preferences and aspirations.
- Work placement programmes (which engage with a range of employers) and ILMs offer mutual benefits to both individuals and organisations alike, and should be considered as a means of addressing issues related to a lack of experience.
- There is a clear preference for job search support to be administered locally, perhaps through the MACs in a more formalised way and, where possible, on a one-to-one basis. This should also include the identification and/or collation of work opportunities compatible with childcare responsibilities.
- The success and popularity of existing service provision mentioned above (e.g. MACs, *Nextstep*) suggests that any further interventions and changes to employment support

for women should draw upon the existing knowledge, experience and expertise of those organisations.

- As many of the research participants were keen to enter employment in the childcare sector there may also be the potential to provide cost efficient childcare services by drawing on the skills and labour of workless women qualified in this area. This could also provide valuable work experience to such women at the same time as increasing the level of provision and going some way to reducing the cost.
- There is a need to provide information on the range of welfare reform measures introduced by the coalition government and to inform women of their benefit rights and entitlements. This should pay attention to the complexities of eligibility and the interplay with household circumstances, which dictate eligibility to certain benefits.
- There is a need for engagement with employers, in terms of addressing discrimination in the workplace and during the recruitment process. This engagement is crucial as a means of raising awareness and cultural sensitivity to the religious and cultural needs of many women in Leicester, and also in helping to tackle age discrimination.
- There is a need for accessible English courses, mainly for "older" Asian women and recent in-migrants. The benefits of such provision extend far beyond access to employment.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Study

In February 2011 Leicester City Council commissioned a team of researchers from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR), at Sheffield Hallam University, to conduct a qualitative research study examining the barriers to female participation in the labour market within the city. The research involved focus groups and in-depth interviews with women currently out of work, which were conducted between March and May 2011. This Report presents the findings from this research.

The study was commissioned as a follow-up to a previous *quantitative* study, completed by CRESR in 2010¹, which profiled the characteristics and context of workless women in Leicester and the surrounding Leicestershire sub-region. It also identified what stakeholders thought were the factors contributing to the persistent low levels of female labour market participation within the city. This second study complements these statistical findings through a more in-depth exploration of the main factors associated with low rates of female labour market engagement within the city. It provides an understanding of the situations and experiences of women in Leicester and reports on their perspectives, aspirations and attitudes towards work. As such the two Reports should be considered alongside each other for a more comprehensive picture of the position with regard to Leicester, but they can also be read as stand alone documents. The aims and objectives, and the methods used in the qualitative study, are outlined in sub-sections 1.3 and 1.4 below.

1.2. Context

This Report builds on the evidence base provided by the initial statistical analyses in the earlier quantitative study. The quantitative study identified factors associated with persistently low rates of female labour market participation and employment in Leicester City. Female economic activity rates in Leicester barely shifted from 65.2 per cent in 1999 to 65.9 per cent in 2009. This trend was at odds with the picture for

¹ Beatty, C., Gore, T. and Powell, R. (2010) *Participation of Women in the Labour Market in Leicester*. Sheffield: SHU.

Great Britain as a whole with female economic activity rates rising from 72.5 per cent to 74.2 per cent over the same period. The already significant gap between Leicester and the national average has therefore widened over time. The female employment rate in Leicester is also very low compared with the national average and has fallen from 59.5 per cent in 1999 to 58.2 per cent in 2009. The same patterns are mirrored when comparing Leicester with the regional figure for the East Midlands.

The Report concluded that it was a combination of several factors which have contributed to the relatively low levels of female labour market participation in Leicester. These factors are not the same for all women across the city. Different issues are applicable to different sections of the community and in different locations across Leicester. The main factors broadly fall under the following headings:

- the ethnic composition of the workforce
- economic inactivity due to a preference not to work amongst some women
- concentrations of benefit claimants in particular parts of the city
- poor qualifications or lack of basic skills
- low levels of pay available
- fewer job opportunities especially as a consequence of the decline of the textiles industry.

These findings fed into the research specification for the current qualitative assessment.

1.3. Aims and Objectives

The initial quantitative assessment identified the need for a complementary qualitative approach which could enhance understanding of the range of factors contributing to the specific situation in Leicester. Informed by the initial research, the *aims and objectives* of this study are therefore:

- to gain greater insight into why different types of females are not working
- to understand why some females have a preference not to work, including cultural issues
- to ascertain specific barriers to entering the labour market for those that would like to enter the labour market or return to it

- to explore the extent to which females understand the changes to the benefits system and what impact this will have on their circumstances
- to explore whether females have tried but failed to find work and what they feel were the reasons behind this
- to explore what support could be provided to help women into work
- to understand any specific training or development needs (e.g. around ESOL and other entry level skills)
- to understand specific supplementary support needs such as childcare, transport, etc
- to make recommendations about future service provision.

1.4. Research Approach

The research used qualitative methods and involved three key phases:

- Phase 1: six focus groups with women in Leicester who are currently out of the labour market
- Phase 2: 10 follow-up in-depth interviews with a sub-set of women
- Phase 3: data analysis

The majority of resources for the project were therefore devoted to direct engagement with women in Leicester, most of whom were trying to gain a foothold in the local labour market. The six focus groups conducted in Phase 1 were held in various locations across Leicester in April 2011 and targeted at specific groups, as specified in the research brief. The selection of groups was informed by the findings from the earlier quantitative study and driven by two key considerations:

- the variation in economic activity rates by ethnicity. For instance, economic activity rates amongst Indian women in Leicester are nine percentage points lower than for Indian women nationally.²
- the spatial variation in the concentration of economically inactive women in Leicester.

The six groups were therefore based on a mixture of ethnicity and geography criteria reflecting the evidence on low female economic activity rates within Leicester and the diversity of experiences. The six groups were:

² Beatty, C., Gore, T. and Powell, R. (2010) *Participation of Women in the Labour Market in Leicester*. Sheffield: SHU.

- White women living in the Beaumont Leys area of the city
- White women living in the Braunstone area
- White women living in the New Parks area
- non-Muslim Indian women
- Muslim women
- women from recent in-coming communities (particularly Somali women).

1.4.1 Focus Groups

In recruiting participants for all six focus groups consideration was also given to capturing three sub-groups of women. This was again informed by findings from the initial research. These sub-groups were:

- women who had previously worked in the declining textiles industry
- women in receipt of out-of-work benefits (e.g. Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), Income Support (IS))
- women who were lone parents.

The vast majority of research participants were accessed through Multi Access Centres (MACs), a city-wide network of eight community-based facilities one of whose aims is supporting people into work. Given the employment support function of the MACs, attempts were also made to access women further from the labour market via local community organisations, but with little success. Consequently, all but one of the focus group participants were engaged directly through the MACs.

The MACs also served as venues for the focus groups. The ease of access and familiar local surroundings for women, coupled with excellent facilities, provided obvious advantages in conducting the focus groups at the MACs.

A total of 24 women took part in the six focus groups. Table 1.1 shows the number of participants at each focus group alongside the venue.

Table 1.1: Focus group participants and venues

Group/Area	Venue	No. of participants
Beaumont Leys	North West MAC	4
Braunstone	Braunstone MAC	5
Indian women (non-Muslim)	City MAC	3
Muslim women	Hlghfields MAC	5
New Parks	New Parks MAC	5
Somali women	St Matthews MAC	2

The target number of participants for focus groups was four to six and this was achieved in most cases. The exceptions were the Somali and Indian focus groups. In these cases several participants who had agreed to take part were subsequently unable to make the focus group.

It should be noted that the focus group sample could never be representative of the diversity of characteristics and experiences of women across Leicester. Rather, the sample provides for illustrative accounts of these experiences with regard to different groups, and draws out common issues and concerns across these groups.

Focus group discussion was facilitated by research team members and was guided by a generic topic guide. Aside from several key topic areas this guide was not employed rigidly and focus group participants were able to define the issues for themselves without these being prescribed to them by the research team. This is important in capturing the diversity of experiences and not excluding any issues from the research. Consequently, the data collected provides a rich source of information which illustrates the self-reported issues and concerns women in Leicester face in gaining access to a difficult labour market. Key broad topics included in discussions included:

- work history and the changing Leicester labour market
- work orientations
- barriers to work
- work aspirations
- job search activities
- access to employment support
- training and development needs

- supplementary support needs (e.g. childcare, transport)
- experiences and knowledge of the changing benefits system.

For focus groups with minority ethnic women specific cultural issues tended to cut across many of these topic areas and these are also reported on in detail where relevant.

In terms of the characteristics of research participants, their residential area and ethnicity were largely dictated by the targeted approach in relation to the six specific groups identified in the research brief. A number of further, albeit limited, individual characteristics were also recorded at focus groups however. It is worth setting these out to provide a general flavour of the kind of household and family circumstances that respondents were in.

Figure 1.1 gives the age breakdown of focus group participants. This was skewed towards women over the age of 35 who accounted for almost 60 per cent of all research participants. This is partly explained by the ethnic composition of the sample. The vast majority of Indian women participating in the research fell into this 'older' age category, which chimes with findings from the quantitative study which suggested that many Indian women seek access to employment after raising a family. The majority of women in the younger age categories, 16-24 and 25-29, recorded their ethnicity as White British.

Figure 1.1: Age breakdown of focus group participants

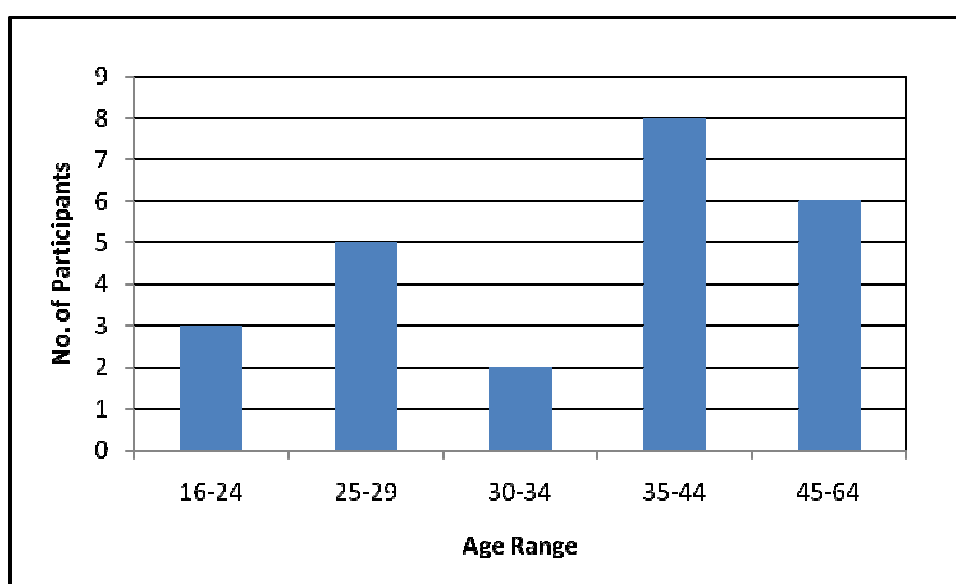


Figure 1.2 shows focus group participants by household type with lone parent households being the most common. Again, this relatively high number of lone parents within the sample is fairly consistent with the findings from the quantitative study which shows that a third of females in receipt of out of work benefits in Leicester claim Income Support as a lone parent.³ Women with dependant children - lone parents and couple households - were particularly dominant within the sample pointing to the importance of interactions between employment and child rearing in understanding worklessness among many women. This is discussed in detail in the Findings section.

Figure 1.2: Household type of focus group participants

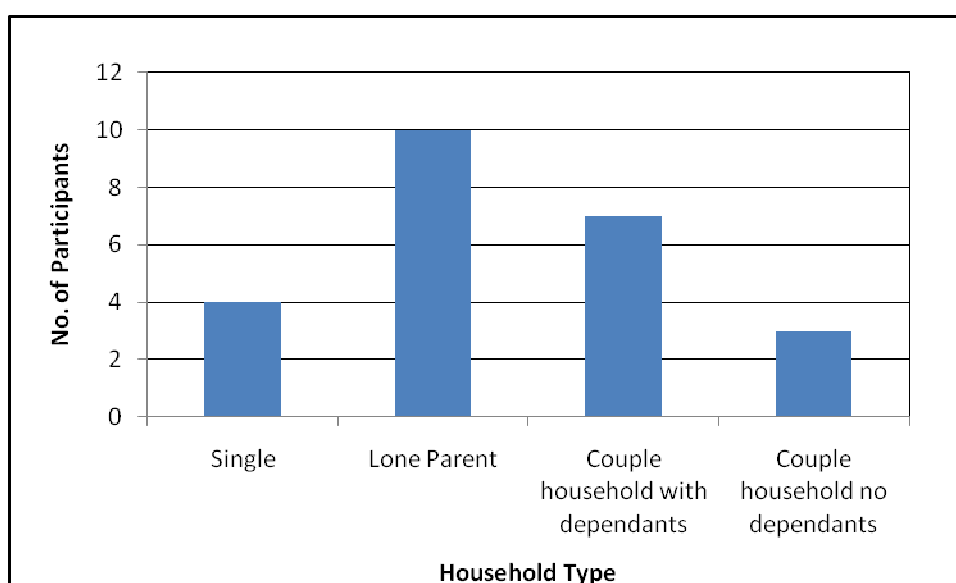
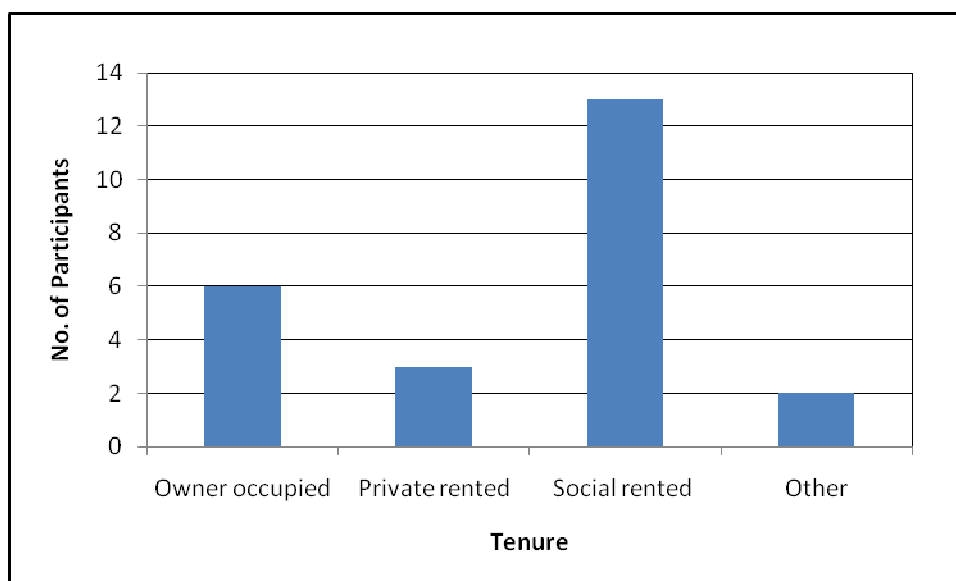


Figure 1.3 shows the housing tenure of focus group respondents. The social rented sector, which includes those tenants renting from the Council *and* housing associations, was the dominant tenure among participants. Social rented accommodation accounted for well over half of all participants, the majority of whom were White British. That said, a quarter of participants were owner-occupiers suggesting a more diverse sample in terms of housing circumstances. Owner occupiers were either White British or Indian/British Indian. All participants renting in the private rented sector were Indian.

³ Beatty, C., Gore, T. and Powell, R. (2010) *Participation of Women in the Labour Market in Leicester*. Sheffield: SHU.

Figure 1.3: Housing tenure of focus group participants



Finally, participants were also asked about their economic position. The vast majority stated that they were unemployed and looking for a job (18 women). A minority were looking after family/home (five women) and were not looking for work in the short-term but wanted to work at some point in the future. One respondent did not record this information. Thus, the majority of women taking part were relatively close to the labour market in terms of job search activities and the like but a minority would fall into the "less engaged" or further from the labour market category.

1.4.2 In-depth Interviews

Follow-up in-depth interviews were then conducted in Phase 2 of the research with a sub-set of ten focus group participants drawn from across the six groups. These interviews were a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews and took place in April and May 2011. This enabled an exploration of the key issues in greater depth than was possible in a group setting, with the same themes and topics explored but in more detail. In-depth, one-to-one interviews also allowed for a fuller understanding of the different position of women in Leicester relative to the local labour market. Some of these individual accounts are captured within box summaries throughout the Report which provide a snapshot of the situations, experiences and diversity across women in Leicester.

Focus group and interview data were analysed using a coding framework which drew out recurrent themes and issues. The next section of the Report presents the findings from this analysis thematically. The final section makes recommendations.

2. Qualitative Findings on Female Worklessness in Leicester

2.1. Introduction

This section presents the findings from the analysis of qualitative data derived from the focus groups and follow-up interviews. Though issues are often interrelated and overlap the findings are presented thematically and are supported by quotes from research participants where these reflect a particular perspective or typical view. Reference is also made to findings from the first quantitative study where relevant.

2.2. Experience and work histories

Research participants were asked about their work histories and experiences of employment within Leicester. The vast majority of women had some experience of work, predominantly within the Leicester area, although the nature of this experience varied significantly. For some respondents their last job was relatively recent while others had taken significant periods out of the labour market since last working, primarily due to fulfilling caring responsibilities. Similarly, there was a great deal of variation in the length of time spent in their last job, with some respondents occupying roles for many years, while others had moved between several posts. There was a remarkable *similarity* however, in terms of the roles previously occupied. Though there were a few exceptions, previous occupations were generally in low-paid sectors and occupations such as:

- cleaning
- factory work
- retail
- administration
- care work
- bar work.

As might be expected many respondents reported experience of working in the textiles, hosiery and footwear industries, which had previously been such large employers in Leicester:

"You haven't got the factories anymore...my Mum, when she finished school she went straight into a job in the factories, but like I said there's no factories around here these days because they've all been shut down" (New Parks focus group participant)

"When I left school it was all hosiery and that area but that's all gone now" (Braunstone focus group participant)

This was particularly true of Indian women taking part in the research. While education was said to be very highly valued across genders among the parents of many second and third generation Indian children this had not always been the case, especially for older women. For these women the textiles industry had served a specific function in the absence of formal education and qualifications. They had previously found it "far easier to find jobs", taking advantage of the many factory and hosiery positions within the city. This was particularly suited to in-migrating Indian women, for whom English was not their first language, as many of the factories and businesses were owned by Indian businessmen. There was therefore no need to have a comprehensive command of English in the workplace, and women were more comfortable in a working environment which was comprised primarily of women from similar backgrounds and in similar situations. In this sense women had been channelled towards specific occupations. Furthermore access to these positions was far less *formalized* than is the case in today's labour market and positions were sometimes acquired through informal networks. Respondents contrasted the typical process in the past, of a one-to-one interview followed by "a handshake and being hired", with the drawn out application process and CV writing followed by a formal panel interview, which can be intimidating. Several women were unfamiliar with this situation at first and had since benefited from courses on job search, CV writing and interview techniques which were deemed positive in terms of preparing them for what to expect (see section 2.5 below).

Though past roles in the textiles sector were deemed easier to access, when reflecting on working in the factories many women reported quite negative experiences. For instance women from the Muslim focus group had valued the local aspect of the factory but none said they would be willing to return to the sector as it was considered to be too low paid:

"They're not willing to pay the minimum wage. They say you're working very slowly, and after years, make you redundant because you're too slow!" (Muslim focus group participant)

For others with experience of factory work they aspired to something "better" and one respondent stated that her previous role in textiles had served to encourage her to broaden her horizons:

"There's more to life than watching Coronation Street and working in the factory and going on holiday. I want more than that to life" (British Indian interviewee).

The sharp decline in the sector had left many women with skills which were deemed non-transferable. For many ethnic minority women the need to re-skill was further accentuated by the related need to acquire English language skills in order to move to other sectors.

"A lot of the hosiery industry tended to employ women and a lot of women from Asian backgrounds. A lot of people have had to re-train to do something else and that's what I've found myself. My barrier does seem to be the need to re-train and it's like going back to school really" (Beaumont Leys interviewee)

These transitions were not always straightforward. For example, one Beaumont Leys respondent, anticipating the decline in the sector, had decided to go to Night School and get some qualifications before moving into an administrative position but was made redundant last year. Some respondents were also not confident about moving from one sector to another. They felt "confident" and "comfortable" about securing employment in the textile industry which was more familiar, but were less so about moving into another sector:

"I went to the factory as a friend worked there, I went and found out myself and when they took you on I was fine you know, but like I say going through different career wise that is where I'm lacking in confidence" (Indian Muslim woman).

"Some people have said do you want to try something new and I'm quite scared by that because I wouldn't know where to start" (Beaumont Leys interviewee).

For some women their lack of employment experience was considered a barrier to work and served as something of a *Catch 22*:

"I've been everywhere and they just turn around and say 'we haven't got any jobs at the minute' or 'you've got to have experience', but how can you get experience if you can't get a job." (Beaumont Leys focus group participant)

"That's the problems these days because you need all the qualifications you can get" (New Parks interviewee).

As noted in the second quote above, a lack of experience set alongside a lack of formal qualifications puts some women in a difficult position, especially in a slack labour market where unemployment is relatively high and competition for jobs is more pronounced. Women in such positions had taken, or were taking steps to address this, either through accessing courses or through voluntary work:

"I've done 2 years unpaid work and if I could have got a job there I would've been laughing. 5 days a week I was doing but I had to say 'I can't keep on coming here'...unpaid work for nearly 2 whole years. I can't keep doing this no more. It felt like this was my job but I just wasn't getting paid for it" (New Parks focus group participant).

Several women had significant work experience in the social care sector but, due to lengthy periods out of the labour market, had found that they needed to secure qualifications in order to get back into the sector. Again, the more formalized access routes into certain areas of employment had impacted negatively on such women. For instance one Somali respondent explained that she had worked for six years in the social care sector in Sweden, but this experience "did not count for anything in the UK". Employers were said to want UK experience and often for significant periods:

"Social care I find difficult [to get work experience] because they have agents at the city centre and I went there and I ask them if I can get a job or experience and they say you cannot you have to look experience for yourself" (Somali focus group participant)

Similarly, another respondent with over ten years experience in the care sector had taken a significant period out of the labour market to care for her relatives and found that when she returned her extensive experience alone was no longer sufficient:

"When I first left school and went into care you didn't need your NVQ and now I've come back you do...I've been doing this for 24 years, and the last 12 was caring for family and no-one's ever asked me for a piece of paper in health and social care and now all of a sudden it's 'have you got this?' and 'have you got that?'...I've had to do a health and social care course and a lot of it I already knew" (Beaumont Leys interviewee)

Thus a key issue for many women was the need to re-train and gain qualifications in order to access sectors in which there were more employment opportunities. The more formalised approach to recruitment and more stringent regulations in many of these sectors acted as a further hurdle to labour market participation. This issue is returned to below.

2.3. Attitudes towards employment

A striking theme which emerged strongly across all six focus groups was the *desire* to work among women, regardless of their situation. The work histories of many respondents bear testament to this. Most participants agreed that they were better off financially if they worked, as opposed to remaining on benefits. All women agreed that they *wanted* to work, and many talked about the boredom associated with being at home all day. This had sometimes led to feelings of depression.

"I really want a job now. I'm fed up at home all the time and just fed up really...you've got nothing to do, if you're working you've got the possibility that you're out and about and doing stuff" (New parks focus group participant).

Indeed, several participants talked about the low quality of life experienced when on benefits, suggesting that you receive “just enough to survive”. This acted as a key motivating factor for most women and there was little evidence of benefit “dependency” or a “culture of worklessness” among respondents. For those respondents with families getting by on benefits was something of a struggle in terms of not being able to provide for their families and enjoy a “decent” quality of life:

"You can't do anything can you? I did a course in town but you have to pay to get there everyday and I just can't afford it".

Similarly, among Indian respondents it was noted how, in general terms, attitudes towards work are very pronounced within Indian culture. There was said to be a strong work ethic influenced by spiritual and religious aspects of Indian culture, albeit qualified by attitudes among some of the community relating to gendered divisions of labour (see section 2.9 below). In this sense there was reportedly a great deal of pride associated with work and a very real stigma attached to claiming benefits, which were viewed very much as a temporary measure for those in need during hard times:

"It's good that it's there but to many people it's seen as a last resort and they would not like to do it. It's a handout really isn't it and Indian people are very proud. Work is valued highly...it's far better to work" (Indian interviewee).

Most participants agreed that, ideally, they did not just want any job but would prefer a role that was suited to their circumstances and that was *not* low paid. This was a key motive for encouraging women back into training and education (see section 2.4 below):

"I was working in retail but now I'm doing some courses so I can go to College because I don't just want to go and get any job, I want to go to College first and get a job that pays well" (Beaumont Leys focus group participant)

However, in many cases this perspective had altered as the period of unemployment got longer, often accompanied by financial difficulties which were compounded in the case of home-owners with mortgages to pay. This was also particularly true of women with relatively long work histories who were unaccustomed to being out of work for long periods:

"You do go out looking for jobs that you've done before or that you can work in but because of the situation, you need the money so you go look elsewhere" (New Parks focus group participant)

The widening of job search activities was common and was sometimes also influenced by perceived pressures from Jobcentre Plus engagements. Several participants talked about being encouraged to apply for jobs that they did not deem at all suitable for them. For example: low paid work; jobs that required a driving licence when they did not have one; or, for single parents, jobs some distance from home and involving unsociable hours.

"I think with the Jobcentre you're more or less forced to aren't you?...If you can't get what you want after your 6 months then I find you're been pressured to look for anything, irrespective of what wage you've been on or what you did before, they just expect you to go for minimum wage doing anything" (New Parks focus group participant).

In this respect it was felt by many participants that, when looking through the criteria for vacant roles, they were applying for jobs that they felt they had a limited chance of securing. There was a view that they were submitting some job applications just to "tick the job search box" and satisfy the conditions of their benefit receipt. This approach was often considered more of a hindrance than supportive as it prevented women from pursuing and preparing for their preferred employment options.

"Hand on heart I can say I've applied for jobs that I'm not even remotely interested in...Just to keep them off my back...it defeats the object and wastes my own time as well as theirs" (New Parks focus group participant).

In general, attitudes towards work were shaped by a range of factors including household circumstances, parental responsibilities, skills and qualifications, past work experience and employment aspirations. In the main, the desire to work is

strong but it is possible to discern two distinct attitudes towards employment from the data analysis.

Firstly, one group of women were struggling to make ends meet when having to get by on benefits income. As a result their need for employment had become pressing, to the extent that usual occupations and aspirations were foregone. Many women in this group were prepared to take lower quality and lower paid work than they were ordinarily used to and were driven by the need to increase household income, often in the face of mounting household bills and sometimes worries over mortgage repayments. Women in this group also tended to be 'older' with older children.

Secondly, for younger women with small children there was often less urgency to find work due to an awareness of the need to gain qualifications and engage in training. Women in this group had less work experience and were relatively less qualified and, as a result, their aspirations were more medium term with acknowledgement of the time they needed to invest in education and training in order to access the kind of jobs they aspired to. Many women in this group were proactive in seeking out training opportunities. These activities were often combined with caring responsibilities, with moves into work anticipated when children reached school age.

2.4. Training and qualifications

While the desire to work among respondents was strong, some women were acutely aware of the fact that their limited educational attainment and qualifications were a significant barrier to obtaining work. In this respect training and education were seen as key to accessing the labour market and in avoiding the "low pay-no pay" cycle of short-term work and out-of-work benefits: *"if you've done NVQ level one and two then you've got a better chance of working as a carer"*. Several women had received little positive feedback when seeking work and this had a direct impact on their decision to engage in training and/or education.

"I handed out CVs everywhere but didn't get anything. I did an NVQ in retail when I was 18, 19 and I worked in a shop for two years but I think it's because I have such a big gap in my CV because I had kids. So, I thought I'll do some courses...I didn't do very well at school" (Braunstone focus group participant).

The view presented in the quote above was a common one and women who had taken time out of the labour market, most commonly due to caring responsibilities, often found they then needed to engage in further training and education. This was often related to work in the health and social care sector, which was a particularly

popular sector among respondents. For instance, two Somali respondents were actively looking for work in childcare or social care and both had completed relevant NVQ courses. NVQs were a popular routeway to enhancing employability and Leicester College was the main provider of these qualifications and valued highly by those who had studied at the College.

Many women had relatively clear ideas about the kind of work they wanted to do and what steps they needed to take to achieve this. However, some women spoke of underestimating the time and effort that needed to be invested in order to gain qualifications. Others cited careers advice and longer-term planning with regard to qualifications and labour market access as something they would find particularly helpful. One identified need with regard to education and training was more adequate and accessible information provision and careers advice. For example, one Muslim respondent noted that there could be more information provision locally with regard to the qualifications needed to access certain roles. *"People are not aware of the need for these qualifications when they want to get into these roles"*. In her case she had received very little advice, information and guidance from Jobcentre Plus or any other agency about what she would need to do to prepare herself for a career as a Teaching Assistant. *"There's no information on what you need to do to get into it...I don't think I would've jumped into it had I known, I'd have been a lot more prepared"*. It was also noted that when she first looked into becoming a Teaching Assistant she was told she required a Level 2 NVQ but now she requires a Level 3 qualification.

On the whole, respondents were relatively engaged in terms of preparing themselves for work and to compete in a difficult labour market. However, a key consideration is the need to enhance the existing provision of formal training and, perhaps more pressing, to disseminate information about access to exactly what is required to gain access to different sectors. Equally important is the need to marry this information with guidance on careers and longer-term career planning. This could be further improved through linking such guidance to up-to-date labour market information which can inform of the sectors where employment opportunities are in most abundance, both in the short and longer-term.

2.5. Services and support

The three most prominent sources of service provision and support cited in relation to employment were Jobcentre Plus, MACs and *Nextstep* (*Nextstep* provides

information and advice to support adults in making appropriate decisions on a full range of learning and work opportunities). The services offered here were often accessed as a complement to the pursuit of formal qualifications; or by those actively seeking work and wishing to increase their chances of employment.

2.5.1. Jobcentre Plus

Jobcentre Plus was the target of much criticism from respondents who felt that they were not getting the support they required. As mentioned above, there was widespread view that the conditionality attached to receipt of benefits was sometimes counterproductive as women had to look for and apply for a certain amount of jobs with little interest or hope of securing them. Many participants also spoke of their engagement with Jobcentre Plus as "patronising", "demoralising" and "stressful". In these terms it was actually considered more unhelpful than helpful. For instance one woman stated:

"I was told by one of the managers down at the Jobcentre that they don't cater for people like me because I'm an older woman. I mean, where do you go from there?" (Braunstone focus group participant).

Asked about the support that was lacking from Jobcentre Plus the response again came back to issues around the arbitrary nature of job search as a condition of benefit receipt. It was suggested that a more targeted and relevant approach could be adopted involving more support and advice from Jobcentre Plus. There was a view among many respondents that the nature of support today was much different than it used to be, with many participants bemoaning the lack of one-to-one engagement, which was particularly valued. There was a view, informed by the perceived impersonal approach of Jobcentre Plus staff, that Jobcentre Plus lacked the customer focus and will to help - "to them you're just a number". The advice received was also said to be inconsistent and at times contradictory. It was felt that with more one-to-one support and encouragement that it would be easier to get a job in terms of combating the demoralising experience of non-responses and applications not being acknowledged.

While some respondents felt Jobcentre Plus could do more to help them, others took a very different view. For instance, one respondent noted how Jobcentre Plus were "very understanding of her situation" when she was caring for her sick mother. Another respondent acknowledged that Jobcentre Plus staff "*can't spend a long time with you because they've got to get so many people signed on, haven't they?*" Another interviewee was very grateful for the support she had received from

Jobcentre Plus and spoke positively of her engagement. Currently in receipt of JSA, she had also received assistance with bus fares from the Jobcentre when she was attending a NVQ course at Leicester College. This was deemed extremely helpful in facilitating her access to training as the course was out of town and was quite a long bus ride.

Several other respondents noted how the pressures on Jobcentre Plus staff had recently increased due to government cuts taking place alongside increasing unemployment. In this context, some respondents felt it was unfair to criticise Jobcentre Plus. Other respondents stated that the experience of Jobcentre Plus was dependent on the member of staff you got to see: some were very positive and helpful whereas others were much less so.

2.5.2. Multi-Access Centres

The network of locally based MACs across Leicester emerged as a particularly valued resource among research participants. It should be noted that as the majority of research participants were accessed through the MACs there may be an element of bias here. That said, there is no disputing the fact that women spoke very highly of the services provided and most had benefited in some way from engagements with the service. In particular the services delivered at the MACs were crucial in terms of building confidence and raising awareness. Many women reported that the encouragement and sense of moral support emanating from the MACs and their employees had been particularly valuable in helping women take the first steps towards the labour market.

"It gives you a bit more, well, you're not on your own and you've got people who can support you and try help you look for a job and everything" (New Parks interviewee)

"If they weren't there I don't know where I'd go for help to be honest" (New parks focus group participant).

This is particularly important given that many of the women spoke of long durations out of work and an erosion of confidence and self-esteem attached to that. The local setting of the MACs and the facilitation of social contact with other people in similar positions should also not be underestimated:

"If it's local it's much better because with me I drive it would be alright but with other women" (Indian interviewee).

"I think they're good, I think they encourage people and it's made me do courses. I've done a few, I've done retail work, health and safety, I've just got into doing maths and English this year. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now. I wouldn't have thought to do my maths and English but this routeway to employment course is good and it's helped me...It just motivates you as well because you can get stuck looking after the kids all the time and it's nice to get out and do something for yourself away from the kids" (Beaumont Leys interviewee).

A range of services and courses were accessed via the MACs including:

- customer skills
- retail
- confidence building to assist with getting people back into work
- interviewing techniques
- CV writing
- internet job search
- basic skills
- health and safety
- signposting to other service provision.

Particularly valued were courses which helped women improve their performance during recruitment processes. As mentioned above the increasingly formalised nature of recruitment was often contrasted unfavourably with those of the past, and for some women was alien and intimidating. Pre-employment courses on interviewing and CV writing helped women to negotiate through these processes and instilled a degree of confidence and preparedness:

"The MAC helped me with an interviewing techniques course. At the beginning I was getting a few interviews and not getting anywhere but apparently I came across as too apologetic. So now I've had to come across more assertive. That was a helpful course" (Beaumont Leys interviewee).

Given the value and accessibility of the MACs one suggestion for further support was to link the MAC centres into job vacancies. The idea here is that Jobcentre Plus and/or firms could contact the MAC and enquire as to whether there were any suitable candidates for positions and advertise jobs through the MAC. There was a consensus that this is better done within the community especially for more localised jobs. At one focus group it was also suggested that the employment support that Jobcentre Plus are meant to offer could be better provided within the community such as the MAC centres. Several respondents agreed that staff at the MACs were said to be more empathetic and did not "look down on people" like Jobcentre Plus employees were said to. Support of this nature appeared to be taking place on a

more informal basis but several respondents expressed a desire to see it more integrated into the MACs

"They've really helped me here because when I did my online applications they really helped me a lot here, couldn't ask for nicer people to be honest" (New Parks focus group participant).

Case study: Re-training and support

Aimee had previously worked in social care for 12 years but then left work to care for family members for another 12 years. First her Father who developed Alzheimer's and then her mother when she was diagnosed with cancer. After emerging from this difficult period of her life she began preparing herself for work.

She had applied for several jobs in the care sector but did not seem to be getting anywhere and found that she kept getting asked about possession of an NVQ. Aimee realised that she would need to do an NVQ in health and social care despite her experience in the sector. Though quite demoralising given the knowledge and experience she had she looked into this and got in touch with *Nextstep* who then pointed her towards the MAC who put her forward for the NVQ. She was fortunate to get onto the course via the routeways path which meant that she did not have to pay for the NVQ. She did courses in Maths and English via the routeways programme and then completed a 5 week NVQ at Leicester College.

She is trying to get back into the care sector and is keen to develop her skills and training further and move into psychology and cognitive behavioural therapy to complement her care experience and qualifications. At the time of interview Aimee was preparing for an imminent interview. The post she has applied for offers room for training and learning while in post and she is keen to take advantage of this.

2.5.3. *Nextstep*

Also spoken of in favourable terms was the service provided by *Nextstep* which consists of a drop-in centre within Leicester city centre offering information, advice and guidance for adults (aged 20 years and over) with a particular focus on learning, work and re-training.

"I know how the jobs market in Leicester for women has sort of depleted over the years but we have had quite a lot of help in Leicester for women like Nextsteps. I think without that I don't think it would've work out that well for women. With the hosiery industry going...we do have that now where women and ethnic minority women and people with disabilities are encouraged into new areas of work" (Beaumont Leys interviewee).

One Muslim woman also spoke in positive terms of the support she had received through *Nextstep* in the form of CV writing skills and interviewing techniques, which she stated had been particularly useful.

While *Nextstep* is centrally located and therefore relatively accessible some women still expressed a preference for locally based provision. They liked their own neighbourhood and valued the fact that they could walk to access help and support, especially in the face of high public transport costs. Even so, the services provided by *Nextstep* proved to be extremely positive for many respondents.

Provision of employment services and support was very well received by women involved in the research and this should be consolidated and harnessed so as to maintain this positive engagement.

2.6. Employment aspirations and job search

As noted above, attitudes towards employment and the routes into it varied according to the particular life stage that women were at and were often dependent on caring responsibilities. However, there was a remarkable consistency in the types of work that women were seeking and aspiring to. Health and social care occupations, retail, clerical/administration and educational roles (typically teaching assistants) figured prominently when women spoke of the kind of work they wished to access.

Indeed some women had very clear ideas about the work they wanted to do and what they needed to do to access these opportunities:

"I'm volunteering at the minute in a school. I've worked in the past but that was 11 years ago, my daughter's 11 you see. I'm doing my NVQ Level 2 at the minute and doing the Teaching Assistant voluntarily but there's been a lot of cuts there and even if I do pass I won't get a job there" (Beaumont Leys focus group participant).

Volunteering was considered a very worthwhile endeavour in its own right, but also in terms of increasing employability. Somali respondents looking to gain employment in the childcare sector had pursued voluntary work at local schools to find work placements. One of these women had been successful and managed to secure three hours twice per week.

There was a perception that there is a greater chance of success within particular sectors. For instance the childcare and social care sectors were cited as an area affording more job opportunities than most. That said, these posts also demanded greater conditions to entry than was the case in the past: *"it's getting harder for women now. Yes, there are jobs in care and social care but even these need qualifications which require a lot of study"* (Indian Muslim interviewee). Retail was also seen as a sector affording more chance of success, *"I'd like to go into retail or something but I've got no experience"*.

Similarly, clerical and administrative roles were seen as areas where there will always be a demand for employees. As one Indian woman noted

"The way I look at it there's always going to be admin work...I'd like to go back to working at the universities because I enjoyed that" (Indian interviewee).

Her work experience was primarily in administrative and secretarial work and she wanted to pursue opportunities in this area in the future. Another participant had trained in reflexology and now wanted to start her own business, but was discouraged by staff at the Jobcentre, who suggested that the venture wouldn't succeed.

Other women had longer term work strategies and were prepared to invest more time in preparing themselves for work. For instance, one woman was currently undertaking an access course covering Maths, English and IT which will provide a route onto a social work course at University. *"It's a long way off but it will be worth it in the long-run....I want to help people"*.

2.6.1. Job search and vacancies

A wide range of methods were employed in job search activities including signing up with agencies, but methods were primarily web-based. It was reported by several respondents that there could be more help from Jobcentre Plus on this front. Another Somali participant spoke positively about the Jobcentre in this regard and said the job search facilities there were easy to use and she liked the automated job vacancies.

Access to IT was also cited as a key factor in enabling access to employment: *"unless you've got your own computer then you've shot it because if you're not there that minute that job is advertised there's that many waiting for jobs you've had it"*.

For those without access to the internet at home the expectation that they should go into town every day and search for jobs at the public library was difficult to swallow. This was deemed too expensive to do every single day and unrealistic.

Job search was also considered stressful by some women, as it is a condition for the receipt of benefit. It entails completing six job searches every two weeks in an identified area of interest established through liaison with JC+ Advisers. *"It's not a 5 minute job is it?"* (see section 2.3 above on this point). This was further compounded by a relatively difficult labour market with many respondents seeing little sense in a "harder line" on benefit claimants at a time when large scale job losses had taken place and employment opportunities were difficult to come by and extremely competitive.

Case study: Job search, agency work and transport issues

Samantha is a 47 year old single parent who is currently claiming JSA. She is currently looking for work and engaged in training. Ideally she would like a full-time job although she will work part-time if that is all that is available. She has started to think about improving her IT skills - though she does use a PC at home - as she thinks this might open up other directions if she does decide she does not want to go back into her former sector: care work. She knows they run courses at the MAC but has not taken it any further yet.

Although local jobs (west side of Leicester) would be ideal, she wouldn't mind travelling, as long as she could get to the workplace by bus. One issue here relates to the unsocial hours associated with most forms of care in people's homes - early starts, late finishes or stopovers - *"with a lot of it you have to sign up with an agency who can send you anywhere around Leicester"*. You could end up working in Narborough and not be able to get back because the buses have stopped. It would also be more expensive as she would have to pay the fares herself because the agency will not cover them. Then if you turned down what the agency offered then they could push you to the bottom of the list, so you end up not doing much work at all. For these reasons she is thinking of switching occupations - *"it would be good to get something settled and permanent, going to the same place at the same time every day."*

2.6.2. *Employment agencies*

The temporary and insecure nature of agency work was not something that appealed to most women. There was concern that short-term posts risked disrupting benefit claims:

"The trouble with [agencies] is that they only employ you for one day and then make you sit home for four days...that way you are losing out on your benefit, the job centre won't accept it that way" (Muslim focus group participant).

This risk and the associated process of restarting a claim - which was considered overly bureaucratic, far from straightforward and something of a rigmarole - meant that most women did not even consider employment and recruitment agencies within their approach to job search: *"you have to fill in your forms again and then you've got to go all over the procedure again"*.

2.7. *Barriers to Work*

Some of the different and overlapping barriers to work have been considered throughout the findings section. However, other key barriers as perceived by women in Leicester are discussed in more detail below.

2.7.1. *The local jobs market*

There was a definite sense of pessimism about the current jobs market with some women describing the situation as "discouraging". One respondent summed up this perspective when asked about support needs and what else would help her access work: *"There needs to be more jobs basically."* For other women returning to the labour market after significant periods out of work, there was surprise at the difficulties encountered in accessing work:

"It's been a bit of a struggle. I honestly thought I'd get a job within a month and I know with the economy and everything and you read things and think 'ooh no' but it's taking so long and I've got years of experience" (Beaumont Leys interviewee).

Though there were some opportunities reportedly available, these tended to be seasonal and temporary posts which were deemed inadequate for those women with a mortgage and significant repayments to meet. Many of the focus group participants were interested in clerical and administrative work and this is where job search efforts had been concentrated, but there was now an acceptance that they should be going for any jobs they can get: *"I was possibly more fussy before but now I'll do anything"*. This was qualified by the fact that work involving significant travel

must be balanced by other considerations such as wage levels, time and family commitments.

The days of multiple opportunities in the hosiery and textiles sector in Leicester were contrasted with the current situation and job vacancies were said to be scarce. One woman noted how the posts she had applied for which matched her previous work experience and skills had attracted 200-300 applicants. This was disheartening and had prompted the take-up of a retail course to broaden her skills base and increase the number of vacancies open to her due to the larger number of jobs available in the retail sector.

Some women did think that there were employment opportunities available locally but the issue was *suitable* jobs and qualifications that matched the criteria of jobs.

"Half the time they want qualifications and you haven't got the qualifications to do it...I just forget it and walk away from it because where you supposed to get your qualifications"(New Parks interviewee).

This situation was contrasted unfavourably with how the Jobcentre and job vacancies used to work which again related to the formalisation of the recruitment process involving CVs and extensive application forms. The more formal process was deemed to put some women at a disadvantage immediately on seeing the length of application forms and the kind of information they were supposed to include. There was also a perception that when jobs did become available these were not always advertised through familiar channels, if at all.

"If there are a lot of jobs about, they're not being advertised. We don't know about them. It goes more on people who know people. I see new faces in Tesco all the time but I haven't seen the jobs advertised" (Braunstone focus group participant).

When considering more localised opportunities in their area of Leicester women felt that the situation was even worse and accepted the need to access opportunities in the city centre and some further afield, in Loughborough for instance.

Case study: Balancing single parenthood and the desire to work

Stacey is single parent in her 20s with a 9 month old baby. She is well qualified (to degree level) and has a good work history. At present she has mixed feelings about working - on the one hand she would like to do something other than being a mother, but at the same time she's really enjoying spending time with her daughter. She thinks that maybe she hasn't pursued going back to work as much as she might have done because she doesn't want to miss things like her baby's first words or starting to walk. But she accepts that soon she will find staying at home with the baby too much - she will have a need to get out and meet other people who are not mums - and to have something that she does for herself. She thinks it would also make economic sense, even though she would only work part-time - and in the long run to show employers that she was willing to work and not just sit around at home. Hopefully when her daughter is older she will be able to get back into a professional job somewhere.

2.7.2. Childcare and the moral obligation of parenthood

Balancing caring responsibilities with work was seen as a particular challenge and not always possible. Given the relatively high proportion of single parents included within the research this issue often figured prominently in focus groups and interviews.

"With 9 o'clock starts, because I've got one in school and one not, I have to be in school for twenty to nine, then have get my baby to my Grandma's and then get to work for 9. I've got to be in three different places at once".

"I go down the Jobcentre and there's not a lot to be honest. It's the hours, if you've got children it's really difficult".

For many lone parents there was the need for employment that enabled them to work and fulfil caring responsibilities. The quote below is typical of these considerations:

"I worked in a nightclub, then got a cleaning job but that fizzled out because it was agency work. Then I got pregnant, had kids, tried to get a job this Christmas but couldn't get one. But now I'm doing college courses and I want to do a teaching assistant course next year" (Beaumont Leys focus group participant).

This was favoured due to the fact that she could work the job around her childcare responsibilities *"when the kids are on holiday I'd be on holiday, when they break-up, I*

break-up, as long as it's a primary school." As well as considering working hours when looking for work parents with young children also required a degree of flexibility from employers. *"If we're parents, we need flexibility...it's no good saying 9-5.30 when you've got to get your kids to school and then they're finishing at 3.30".* As a result several women were seeking work within the school system in order to synchronize their working hours with their children's schooling: *"That's why I want something in school, that's in their time even the holidays will suit me".*

Many single parents expressed very negative views about the way in which Jobcentre Plus attempted to push them into occupations and working patterns which were virtually impossible to square with childcare responsibilities. The widespread view was that motherhood is work in its own right and that caring for young children is a priority and a moral responsibility. It was felt that the approach of Jobcentre Plus paid no attention to this:

"My daughter's 12 and she's got a good head on her shoulders. Still from my point of view I don't want to leave her on her own all that time...They don't bother about your family commitments, 'oh, she's twelve now, she can do this, she can do that'" (New Parks focus group participant).

"I was thinking 'get the job and worry about the hours and the babysitting afterwards'. I said I'm flexible and can do 16 hours a week...That's the Jobcentre's view as well 'don't worry about the hours, worry about that later'. It's weird, they expect you to leave your kids with anybody but I don't want to leave him with some strange people. I'd rather it be with someone I know" (Braunstone focus group participant)

This issue was further accentuated by the prohibitive cost of childcare which served to erode some of the financial gains from working:

"Nurseries are dear as well. I was paying nearly £200 a week for three or four days...My friend can only afford it because she's at University so it's getting paid and it works for her".

Other respondents expressed an aversion to formal childcare: *"I'd sooner use the crèches and the nurseries than a childminder."*

For several respondents caring for family members had also restricted their opportunities to work: *"my husband had depression so I would like a job nearby, so if something goes wrong I can come home straight away".* One British Indian woman spoke of having to take time out of the labour market to care for her sick mother, which was said to be common among the Indian community, given the closer ties of the extended family. This had led to a preference for part-time work in order to

balance caring responsibilities with a working income. She had returned to the labour market at a very difficult time for the economy and had struggled to find work.

Case study: Childcare barriers

Emma is a single parent with three children who sees childcare as a particular employment barrier for her. She is only able to work during school hours, which severely constrains the type of work she can apply for. Consequently she is pursuing a role as a Teaching Assistant which is particularly appealing given the fit with school hours. Childcare was also considered prohibitively expensive and the £4.50 an hour charged at the crèche where she works voluntarily was cited as an example of the financial challenge this poses. Given that she has three children it is not difficult to see how the costs associated with childcare could act as a disincentive to working unsociable hours, not to mention the fact that she would see less of her children. With this in mind it was stated that free childcare would be a major factor in allowing her to access a range of different jobs and not be confined to those positions which coincided with school hours: *"Evening work and jobs that involve night shifts and things are just not possible for me at the moment"*. She did not rule out such roles in the future however, when her children are older.

2.7.3. Transport

Transport issues were a recurring theme across focus groups, with the public transport system in Leicester seen as a not particularly strong enabling factor in terms of access to work. On the contrary, transport was considered prohibitive in terms of both time and expense, and was a factor in a minority of women confining their job search to the immediate local area where jobs would be within walking distance:

"Just to go to town it's about £3! If I got a job I wouldn't want it to be in town because it would cost me a fortune on buses but Tesco is not too bad because that's just a walk" (Beaumont Leys focus group participant).

The radial nature of the bus service was problematic requiring travel to the city centre and then out again which added further time to commutes and was a major concern for women who had to get home prior to school finishing:

"From here we always have to go to city centre and then catch a bus from there again".

"At the moment I'd be quite happy as long as it's a bus route. But now you have to go into town and back out again to get to a lot of places".

By way of example, one Indian respondent was offered a job out of Leicester but had to begin work at 7am. Public transport did not fit with this work pattern and she would not have been able to get to work on time without a car. She offered to start later and work later but had to turn the post down as this could not be accommodated by the employer. Similarly, a Somali woman had gained employment in social care, her preferred area, but was heavily reliant on a colleague to drive her around the neighbourhood. She could not really use public transport to fulfil the aspects of the job as this proved impossible, despite her best efforts. She therefore had to give the job up after only one week. These examples starkly illustrate the way in which transport can serve as a distinct barrier to employment.

Transport concerns were also said to be ignored by Jobcentre Plus, in a similar vein to the way in which women felt their childcare responsibilities and job search preferences were. Women felt pressured to apply for jobs that were some distance from their homes and therefore which made it more difficult to meet their caring obligations.

"I had my 6 months review last week and he said 'oh we'll have to change something here' so he put down 'is willing to travel up to 90 minutes each way'. Hold on a minute, that's hour and half each way on top of a full-time job and I'm a single Mum!" (New Parks focus group participant).

It was felt that such an approach ignored the realities of single parenthood and privileged paid work over the unpaid work of motherhood. This was a very emotive subject for many respondents, and women were keen to assert that they would not be prepared to leave their children on their own for long periods - even if they are 13 or 14: *"it's not just little kids but young teenagers as well"*. The time aspect of travelling to work was a key factor which recurred within conversations. It was felt by a majority of respondents that they were being asked to put their families second in order to secure employment.

As jobs were perceived to be "spread out all over the place" (e.g. Coalville, Melton Mowbray, Loughborough) transport was considered very important. There was a dominant view that a half hour journey to work is reasonable but anything beyond that is difficult, especially for women with dependent children. Other women, however, were prepared to travel but for the right job

"I wouldn't mind going to Loughborough. If there was a job that came up then I would go for it...if that's the job I really want to do then I will go for it" (New Parks interviewee)

Several respondents also cited not having access to a car as a significant barrier on employment opportunities. This was often related to particular sectors and roles:

"Especially with the carer work... the first thing they will ask you is 'do you drive?' I am having a problem there, I don't drive, I have to travel on public transport" (Somali focus group participant)

In general terms, the majority of respondents would prefer work in their local area if possible, but there was a realistic acknowledgement that this was difficult to achieve. This related in part to the lack of a car and the expense of public transport, but mainly to enable them to fulfil their caring responsibilities. Two respondents had adult caring responsibilities and needed to be able to get home quickly if needed.

2.7.4. Discrimination

A number of research participants spoke of their experiences of discrimination in relation to employment. This related to religion, ethnicity and age.

A limiting factor for Muslim women in terms of the work they can access was said to be the religious practice of wearing a headscarf. One respondent noted that although she is happy to remove her *hijab* while she is undertaking her voluntary work at a local crèche (and put it back on as soon as she finishes), for other women from her community this was said to be more problematic.

"I am flexible if they don't want me to wear it I don't really mind...I would go for interview in it but then if I had to work in a school where there is male teachers I wouldn't mind" (Indian Muslim interviewee)

Given that there are men present at the crèche some women would simply not be able to work there without wearing their headscarf. Attitudes towards female Muslim dress were certainly deemed to limit the number of places where Muslim women can work and therefore their employment options.

Minority ethnic respondents did not see their clothing as a barrier as such, but perceived employers as doing so. If they have to wear a uniform this can sometimes be problematic.

"The uniform yeah, that becomes a barrier sometimes...some uniforms are fine if it's a dress and you are allowed to wear your headscarf then that's fine but if the headscarf has to come off then that's a barrier" (Indian Muslim focus group participant).

Religious practices were also said to be a factor for roles involving the preparation of food such as those in care homes and social care. It was stated by one Muslim respondent that she would be unable to handle or prepare pork products, and this was an issue that she was aware had come up for other women in her local community.

Another religious consideration for Muslims was the need to be afforded prayer time in the workplace. Many employers do not give Muslim workers the flexibility to meet these practices which again can serve as a barrier. One Muslim respondent likened it to allowing other employees to take a smoking break and did not see why it should pose such a problem. Respondents explained that prayer was a major part of their life and identity, and they needed time to do this.

"Five times daily prayer is like how we breathe air, that's how our prayer is to us... it is very important to us...we can pray anywhere, in a corner, it's not like we need a big space or anything we just need a corner to pray in" (Muslim focus group participant).

This lack of flexibility was further accentuated by the fact that not everyone is confident enough to raise these issues with employers and explain that they need to pray. Consequently, many Muslim women simply will not take a job where the employer will not allow prayer time.

Perceptions and experiences of discrimination also had a bearing on where some ethnic minority women would be prepared to work. Some women stated that they would not consider working in some areas of Leicester (predominantly White areas of the city), due to the perceived threat of discrimination and racism which served to undermine confidence. When talking about certain areas such as predominantly white Braunstone, one respondent was cautious:

"I would go for the first day but I wouldn't let them thingy me, I would go and see how it is, if I feel uncomfortable then I wouldn't go again"

One suggested means of helping to address this issue was the idea of outreach work to educate employers and raise cultural and religious awareness in the workplace:

"There should be Muslim role model women going out there to educate employers alongside non-Muslim women to support them" (Muslim focus group participant).

Somali respondents also spoke of experiences of discrimination which were often quite subtle but discernible:

"Sometimes when you go to interview and you have everything, they say we are going to call you back but nobody ever does call you back. I have been in that situation a couple of times" (Somali focus group participant).

"Even for cleaning I have been interviewed for cleaning work and the first time she sees me I can see her face, it just says 'you've got no chance'" (Somali focus group participant).

Some participants also felt that age discrimination was a barrier to employment. One woman suggested that because a lot of women had been employed in Leicester's textiles industry, when those jobs were lost, women had to start to look for other work. She suggested that they were then patronised as they were starting again, with managers who were younger than them.

"I find that because I'm getting to that age where I'm a little bit older and I want something more permanent and they want the younger ones who'll come and go. Or they want someone fresh and my age may count against me" (New Parks focus group participant).

These perspectives and experiences are particularly sobering and suggest a very real need for engagement with employers. In such a diverse city as Leicester the presence of discrimination with regard to employment is a fundamental barrier in terms of addressing the gap in female economic activity rates between the city and comparator areas.

2.8. Knowledge and experience of the benefits system

The coalition government has recently embarked on the most extensive reform of the welfare and benefits system in the UK in many years. In this context one of the issues explored in the research was the extent to which women in Leicester are aware of the changes and what the impact on them might be.

Most respondents were aware of the ongoing reforms and the shift towards more conditionality attached to benefit receipt. However, when asked what the changes would mean for their specific circumstances there was little knowledge of the impact. There was no discussion of the new Universal Credit system to be introduced and very few respondents had heard of it. The most common benefit change referred to

was the change to Income Support for Lone Parents: *"I know there's some changes, you need to be working by the time your youngest is seven"*. Several women were aware of these changes, but there was very little discussion when asked about changes to Housing Benefit, overall benefit caps and Incapacity Benefit and Employment Support Allowance.

Similar perspectives were also evident among the Indian and Somali research participants. Somali participants were currently claiming Jobseekers Allowance. While they were not fully cognisant of the changes to the benefits system and the impact they might have they anticipated receiving less of an entitlement and this made them more determined to get a job. They did not envisage any problems with the transition from benefits to employment.

While most women in the Indian focus groups were aware that changes to the benefit regime were imminent or taking place, they also had little knowledge of what exactly this meant for them and their household income and circumstances. Interestingly, it was suggested that the strong networks of family support within the Indian community meant that people were better able to adapt to changes to the benefits system through "the moral and material support" they received.

Though ongoing changes to the benefits system were not very well understood, one Indian respondent noted that Leicester has "a wide range of agencies that provide excellent support and advice...but people need to seek this information out for themselves". This view was the exception rather than the norm, however. When asked about the provision of information with regard to changes to the benefits regime, the majority of respondents felt that this was poor and that Jobcentre Plus were not particularly good at explaining what this meant for them and their situation.

There was also a lack of knowledge with regard to the entitlements that many women were eligible for. For instance, in Beaumont Leys there was little knowledge of what was available in terms of support for childcare and respondents at this focus group stated that more advice and guidance on this area would be particularly welcome.

The reforms to the benefit system and related conditionality were a very real worry for many women:

"If your job searches aren't good enough they're threatening to cut your money, which absolutely petrifies me. But if there's no jobs to search for" (New Parks focus group participant)

There was also a fear among a handful of respondents that if they were to find a job and come off benefits, but that job subsequently did not work out, then they would not be able to claim again and would end up in arrears:

"If I find a job now and I thought 'I don't want to do this job now', then the Jobcentre wouldn't let you leave would they" (Braunstone focus group participant)

"That is a worry, if you get in arrears with anything. Just moving from getting a job back to benefits gets you into arrears with rent and Council Tax, there's that gap in between" (New Parks interviewee).

Understanding and awareness of the changes to the benefits regime is clearly something which women need more information and advice on in order to prepare for any detrimental changes to their circumstances. At present there is little knowledge of the overhaul of the welfare regime and this needs to be addressed.

2.9. Cultural and ethnic diversity

A number of issues discussed within focus groups and interviews were specific to ethnic minority groups. These issues are discussed in turn below.

2.9.1 The role of women and attitudes towards female employment

A key issue shaping orientations towards work among *some* women from ethnic minority backgrounds was said to be the traditional gendered division of labour.

"Indian women are the core of the family and that's why we're still very close knit families because women don't tend to work. However you do get women who are working and who have kids too. But I think it depends on the individual really" (Indian focus group participant).

These closely knit ties of family and social networks also had a bearing on the aversion to formal childcare. That is, some mothers would reportedly rather look after their kids themselves, or have them be looked after by a relative.

"Most mothers see childcare as their responsibility up to a certain age and many would not be willing to use formal childcare" (Indian focus group participant).

As the burden of childcare often falls squarely on women, this was deemed an important factor in understanding the low rates of female employment. That said,

these trends were also said to be changing among second and third generation Indian women. There was said to be more use of nurseries within the community as well as other formal childcare arrangements. This was not merely a case of enabling mothers to work however, but was also considered a positive change for their children in terms of socialising and mixing with other children from different backgrounds.

"I want my kids to grow up around different cultures and mix with other kids and not just my mother-in-law" (Indian focus group participant).

"More and more people are putting their children in childcare...for third generation women with mortgages they have no choice but to work and they cannot afford to take years out of work" (Indian interviewee).

Asked about the relatively low female economic activity rate in Leicester, respondents cited the ethnic and cultural diversity of Leicester as a key issue in explaining this. Indian women participating in the focus groups suggested that the large number of small Asian-owned family businesses was a factor which impacts upon the number of women who are economically inactive. It was noted that some women would either help out with the family business (especially local shops and smaller businesses) from time to time, though not receive a formal wage or salary; or would be engaged in unpaid work caring for family and relatives and therefore have no desire to enter waged employment. These women would ordinarily not be claiming benefits either and would therefore not be classed as economically active.

"I think within Indian communities a lot of the barriers are caused by themselves. A lot of Asians don't like their women to go out working because they feel threatened, do you know what I mean?...There's a wealth of information out there in all languages so I think it's up to the community to get out there" (Indian interviewee)

Attitudes towards women working were also said to be changing among the Muslim community, though it was stated that this is variable and different communities and families have different perspectives. Women talked about the restrictions sometimes placed on their peers within the family not to further their education.

"There is still some restriction on women, parents can be quite strict as they think their daughters may you know, be mixing and things like that...or they may feel threatened that the women are going to be more superior in terms of the education" (Muslim focus group participant).

Things were said to be changing however, partly driven by the desire among some Muslim women to afford greater opportunity to their daughters than they were given.

It was stated that generational change was occurring. There was a general agreement among Muslim respondents that the "older generation never worked", but their generation would like to work and be educated and would like their children to gain more independence. The majority of the group wanted their children to be better educated and attend College and University. *"like us, we weren't given that option"*.

"People are coming out of it, but in some households there is still a lot of control and like me I don't want that, I want my children to become something" (Muslim interviewee).

2.9.2. English language skills

Research participants from ethnic minority backgrounds had a very good command of the English language and consequently did not cite this as a particular barrier to themselves. This was discussed however, in the context of other women in their respective communities.

For older women, "aged over 50", there was said to be a need for training centres which could address language barriers and provide basic skills. This was deemed important to two particular groups of women:

- those who had previously been employed in the more informal textiles sector, were unfamiliar with the modern jobs market and the processes involved and had poor English language skills;
- women who had raised a family and their children had flown the nest: *"women who want something for themselves after raising their children"*.

For some women in these groups it was suggested that the fear of learning (or reluctance) and accessing support, related to English skills, meant that those with practical skills were *"being held back due to not being able to express themselves in English"*. In this regard many skills were "going untapped".

At the same time it was also noted that there is perhaps a need to move beyond the basic skills agenda to enable women to compete in the labour market. Reference was made to the "computer age" and the essential skills required for most positions. There was a consensus that there was some reluctance, particularly among older generations, to embrace the information age, and this was related to both resistance and fear. One woman stated that there was a need for potential employees to be "open-minded" about IT skills and express a willingness to learn as different

employers have different systems, so there is invariably a learning process involved. The fear and resistance to this could prove very detrimental to employment prospects.

3. Service Provision and Support Needs for Workless Women in Leicester

3.1. Introduction

The preceding chapter has discussed the findings from qualitative research with workless women in Leicester and focused particularly on attitudes and barriers to employment. This section draws on this data to set out the key areas in which women stated that they require support in order to access suitable employment. It should be noted however, that any success in addressing low levels of female labour market participation in Leicester is also contingent upon demand-side measures to increase employment opportunities (as discussed in the earlier quantitative study). The support needs identified here relate solely to those services identified by women taking part in the research.

3.2. Information, advice and guidance

While many respondents had benefited from the provision of advice related to training and employment support, there were some women who felt their choices could have been better informed. Providers such as *Nextstep* and the network of MAC centres in Leicester are currently providing invaluable services in this area to many women in the city. However, there were several areas where women felt there were gaps or where this provision could be enhanced.

The excellent work of providers such as *Nextstep* should be built upon, in particular around careers advice at an early stage of women's labour market engagement. Some women felt that, had they been more aware of their career options and the preparations that were required, they may have opted to take a different path. This may be a case of improving links and referral processes, but it was also suggested that there is a need for more locally based and well informed careers advice. This may often be as simple as setting out the entry requirements to particular occupations, but could also lead on to referrals for training, education and courses.

Though many of the women taking part in this research were engaged in such service provision, there is a large group of women in Leicester, identified in the earlier quantitative study, who are not engaged at all, and who could benefit significantly from the services currently on offer. This is obviously a two-way process, and women themselves need to show a willingness to seek out such support. However, in terms of awareness raising and trying to engage those harder to reach groups, there is the need for outreach work which can access women in their local communities. Given that some women have no desire to work, due to cultural factors or looking after families and homes, efforts should be focused on identifying those women who do have work aspirations but require encouragement and preparatory support such as confidence-building and raising awareness.

The findings above also illustrate that most women aspire to only a handful of employment sectors, many of which are low-paid. Advice and guidance should also seek to raise employment aspirations where relevant, and not simply push people towards any job.

3.3. Linking advice and guidance to the local labour market

Careers advice also needs to consider the dynamics of the local labour market in Leicester. Again *Nextstep* and the MACs were seen as pivotal in assisting women with transitions to other sectors in the face of the continuing demise of the textiles and footwear sectors in the city. However, many women were unsure of the areas in which they may have greater success in terms of securing suitable work. Local labour market data should be monitored and updated so as to inform women of growth sectors (and declining sectors) in order to maximise their chances of finding work. This needs to be balanced alongside individual preferences and aspirations.

3.4. Access to training and work experience

For some women that we spoke to a lack of previous work experience was seen as a particular stumbling block in their journey towards employment. Volunteering is one such means whereby women can gain experience - and the voluntary and community sector could play a role here in terms of matching people to relevant opportunities - but this is often confined to particular sectors and particular roles. Some women spoke of the desire to conduct work placements in their *preferred* areas of work, so as to get some experience behind them and to prepare them for particular sectors when they eventually secure employment. In this respect work placement programmes, which engage with a range of employers, offer mutual benefits to both

individuals and organisations alike, and should be considered as a means of addressing issues related to a lack of experience.

Given the prominence of health and social care occupations among the preferences of women in our sample, there may also be scope for the development of Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) programmes in this sector. Such programmes can combine real work experience with education and training and provide a structured route into employment for those looking to return to learning.

3.5. Support with job search

As noted in the findings section many women saw job search activities as a means of keeping Jobcentre Plus "off their backs", and as a consequence found themselves applying for jobs they had no experience or interest in. A significant number of women expressed a desire for support with job search, especially those without IT access and for whom the use of computers can be relatively daunting. The preference here was for job search support to be administered locally, perhaps through the MACs in a more formalised way and, where possible, on a one-to-one basis.

This would also allow a more tailored approach to job search. For instance, many women felt pressured into applying for roles that were not compatible with their childcare responsibilities and that they could not realistically fulfil. There is therefore a demand for job search support that can help women identify jobs (and perhaps local employers) more amenable to the accommodation of caring responsibilities (e.g. posts consistent with school hours).

3.6. Building on success

The success of existing service provision discussed above suggests that any further interventions and changes to employment support for women should draw upon the existing knowledge, experience and expertise of those organisations. While *Nextstep* and the MACs were prominent in this Report there is a whole raft of community organisations providing support to women in Leicester. This support should be co-ordinated and harnessed so as to identify good practice that can be replicated elsewhere and also to identify any gaps in provision, including the geography of provision, across the city.

3.7. Support with transport

Transport emerged as a particular barrier for many women taking part in the research. Obviously there is only so much that can be done locally in terms of mismatches between the location of jobs and jobseekers. However, the cost and provision of public transport could be one area that offers more scope for intervention. Short of the administration of a subsidy (e.g. bus passes) for women in low paid occupations and struggling with transport costs, this would require innovative approaches to addressing the issue. Lessons could be learned here from existing schemes such as those in rural areas (e.g. *Wheels to Work* programmes) which involve the provision of free transport from certain residential settlements to employment centres. Such schemes can play a crucial role in alleviating what appears to be a significant barrier to work for women in Leicester.

3.8. Childcare provision and support

The cost of childcare is also a significant barrier for many women in Leicester. Similar to the above transport barriers, addressing this issue is not an easy fix. A subsidy approach was something cited by many women that would be particularly welcome, but given the current economic climate this may not be possible. Again innovative approaches that address early years provision may be required. As many of the research participants are keen to enter employment in this sector there may also be the potential to provide cost efficient childcare services by drawing on the skills and labour of workless women qualified in this area. This could also provide valuable work experience to such women at the same time as increasing the level of provision and going some way to reducing the cost.

There is also a role for employers here. There is a need to actively engage employers and encourage flexible working practices which would allow women to negotiate hours in light of caring commitments. Such approaches are already apparent among some public sector organisations (e.g. working "five days in four", changing hours during school holidays, linking working hours to school hours) which can serve as a model.

3.9. Welfare reform and the benefits system

Given the extent of welfare reform that has been, and is currently being, undertaken by the coalition government, it is concerning that very few women are aware of these changes. Understanding and awareness of the changes to the benefits regime is

clearly something which women need more information and advice on in order to prepare for any detrimental changes to their circumstances. At present there is little knowledge of the overhaul of the welfare regime and this needs to be addressed. While there is knowledge that reform is taking place, most women knew little about what this would mean for them, or how they and their families may be affected. There is a need to provide information on the range of measures introduced by the coalition government and to inform women of their benefit rights and entitlements. This should pay attention to the complexities of eligibility and the interplay with household circumstances, which dictate eligibility to certain benefits. This will enable women to better plan for the future.

3.10. Cultural awareness and flexibility among employers

Many of the barriers discussed in the preceding chapter are of relevance to all women in Leicester. Some, however, pertain solely to ethnic minority women. This puts women from ethnic minority communities at a further disadvantage, none more so than incidences of racism and discrimination relating to employment opportunities. Given that addressing the lag in female participation rates in Leicester requires significant engagement with women from ethnic minority communities, combating discrimination is a key challenge. There is a need for engagement with employers in this area as a means of raising awareness and cultural sensitivity to the religious and cultural needs of many women in Leicester. The suggestion of outreach work to educate employers of their legal responsibilities and to raise awareness, made by one respondent, would be a step in the right direction.

3.11. English language skills

The decline of the textiles, hosiery and footwear industries has eroded one of the main sectors employing large numbers of Asian women in Leicester. Re-training and re-skilling in this context also implies improvement in English language skills as many factories did not require a thorough command of the English language. Therefore, there is a need for accessible English courses, mainly for "older" Asian women and recent in-migrants. The benefits of such provision extend far beyond access to employment.