A vibrant rainbow arches across a clear blue sky, its colors transitioning from red on the left to violet on the right. Below the rainbow, a lush green landscape with rolling hills and dense foliage is visible. The overall scene is bright and hopeful, contrasting with the report's title.

At the wrong end of the rainbow:

unemployment in Blaenau Gwent

A Bevan Foundation report

Blaenau Gwent North Ebbw Fach Cluster Communities First Prosperous Team

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We have made every effort to ensure this report is accurate but responsibility for any errors, and for the views in the report, are those of the Bevan Foundation.

Bevan Foundation
145a High Street
Merthyr Tydfil CF47 8DP
www.bevanfoundation.org

Registered Charity 1104191

Contents

Summary	2
1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. LOOKING FOR WORK.....	4
Difficulty finding work.....	4
Full-time work	6
Part-time work	6
Flexible hours or commission-only	7
Shift or dirty work	7
Work outside the area e.g. Cwmbran	8
Conclusion	9
3. HELP FINDING WORK.....	10
'Distance' from the labour market	10
Help finding work	12
Job Centre.....	12
Work Programme.....	12
Work Club	13
Friends and family	15
Further Help.....	15
Conclusion	15
4. LIVING ON A LOW INCOME	16
Impact of sanctions.....	16
Managing on a low income	17
Conclusions	18
5. THE CHALLENGE.....	19

Summary

1. This report has been written for Blaenau Gwent Communities First North Ebbw Fach Cluster by the Bevan Foundation – an independent think tank and research centre.
2. It looks at the experiences of unemployed people in the area, based on interviews with people attending the Work Club in Winchestown.
3. It finds that Blaenau Gwent has the most difficult job markets in the whole of Wales and possibly the UK. It has lost more than quarter of its semi- and unskilled jobs, and now has high levels of long-term unemployment.
4. People attending the Work Club are very keen to work and will accept almost any job – except zero hours and commission-only jobs which will not support themselves and their families.
5. Their experiences of help offered by the Work Programme are variable, but almost all were very positive indeed about the help offered by the Work Club. Most had not found Job Centre Plus helpful.
6. A significant minority of people had had their benefits sanctioned, usually for reasons that people felt were arbitrary or unfair. Being sanctioned seems to distract people from looking for work rather than encouraging them.
7. The people interviewed experienced considerable hardship, with only a tiny minority being able to afford to eat healthily and heat their homes adequately.
8. Blaenau Gwent needs more, practical help for unemployed people to enable them to overcome the barriers they face. It also urgently needs both an increase in local employment and better access to opportunities elsewhere, especially by public transport.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the focuses of the Welsh Government's Communities First programme is helping people into work. Each Communities First 'cluster' of communities has a small team of staff tasked with increasing the prosperity of people in their area, in particular by increasing the number in employment.

Blaenau Gwent Communities First North Ebbw Fach Cluster has a population of 11,000 in Blaina, Nantyglo and parts of Brynmawr. 23% of the population of working age receives an out-of-work benefit. The Communities First team have developed a range of activities designed to increase participation in employment. To provide a context for their work, the prosperous team of Communities First asked the Bevan Foundation to undertake a short study of the employment and unemployment in the area.

This reports sets out the finding based on:

- A brief analysis of recent changes in the labour market in Blaenau Gwent.
- Interviews with 30 participants at the Winchestown Work Club.
- Focus group with 5 individuals whose stories illustrate the challenges faced.

We are very grateful to everyone who took the time to share their experiences with us. All the stories have been anonymised, using different names, to protect people's identities.

The findings demonstrate the twin difficulties faced in Blaenau Gwent in general and by the Communities First team in particular: an exceptionally tough labour market, probably the most challenging in Wales, and people who, although keen to work, are some distance from the labour market because of their lack of recent work experience and relevant qualifications. While all the talk in the UK-media is of recovery from recession, full employment and a thriving economy look to be a long way away in Blaenau Gwent. For many, the experience is like being 'at the wrong end of the rainbow' – hence the title of the report.

“Blaenau Gwent's labour market is possibly the most challenging in Wales”

2. LOOKING FOR WORK

Blaenau Gwent has suffered in the current recession to an extraordinary extent. In the five years from June 2008, when the recession began, to September 2013, Blaenau Gwent has lost nearly 1 in 10 of its jobs, a total loss of 2,700 employees. This is nearly a quarter (23.5%) of **all** the jobs lost in Wales, in an area with just 2.2% of Wales' population.

Hardly surprisingly, unemployment increased sharply and has remained at very high levels since 2008. In the five years to September 2013, the number of people out of work in Blaenau Gwent increased four-fold, compared with an increase of 50% for Wales as a whole. Its unemployment rate was lower than the Wales rate at the onset of the recession, but it is now more than twice as high at over 15%. Today, there are nearly 5,000 people in the area who are looking for work.

“More than 25% of semi- and unskilled jobs have disappeared – with a high human cost”

Semi- and unskilled jobs were particularly hard hit by the recession. Together, elementary occupations and process, plant and machine operatives accounted for 30% of all employment in Blaenau Gwent in the year to June 2008. These two occupational groups alone contracted hugely - more than 25% of semi- and unskilled jobs have disappeared, some 2,000 jobs. This kind of large-scale contraction – perhaps even collapse – in employment comes with a high human cost.

Even though there are very modest signs that the labour market is beginning to recover (total employment has increased by 800 between March and September 2013), it is clear that finding work in Blaenau Gwent remains extremely difficult – probably the most challenging in Wales if not the UK. In the short time since the research was carried out, Blaenau Gwent has suffered yet more job losses, the latest being the closure of the Stagecoach depot in Brynmawr with the loss of 77 jobs, a big blow in a small community.

Difficulty finding work

The difficulties of finding work in Blaenau Gwent were very clear from the people we interviewed. All but two said that they found it difficult or very difficult to find work. Several said that there simply not enough jobs available:

There are no jobs, not many at all.

There just isn't that many jobs.

Jason's story

Jason is in his 20s with a partner and child. He last worked about 6 months ago, in a factory on a temporary, zero hours contract. He goes on the internet every day looking for work, and is required to apply for 3-4 jobs a week. He says he's 'constantly' looking for a job, but because of the shortage of suitable employment he says he ends up applying for jobs he is 'in no way qualified for'.

Jason's been sanctioned in the past for using the wrong email address when he logged his job search, so he was deemed not to have done it. He now writes everything down in his log book.

He felt he had had little help to find employment until he came to the Work Club.

"This place is helpful – they find funding for courses and that. THIS should be mandatory. Instead of pushing us into short-term factory work, find us a job WE want, then hopefully we'll be longer in a job, rather than find us a job for 5 weeks then we're back where we are."

His dream job is in security, because it will offer full-time hours at the Minimum Wage. With the help of the Work Club he has recently obtained his SIA licence which will enable him to apply for security work.

The 'claimant commitment' that jobseekers are required to agree to receive job seekers allowance usually specifies the number of jobs they required to look at and apply for each week. Not all claimants had a target, but those that did typically had to look at 4-6 jobs a day / 16 a week and apply for 2-4 jobs a week. Some job seekers did far more than this, as one interviewee participant described:

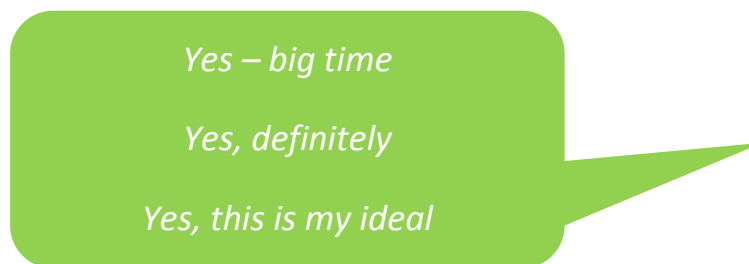
Last year I applied for 822 jobs! This year I have applied for 80-100 already

It was clear that the vast majority of people were very keen to work. We asked whether people were willing to accept different types of job if one was offered to them - all but one would accept at least one of the options we put to them and most would be willing to accept pretty well any job. There was little if any sign of people being reluctant, work-shy or any of the other claims sometimes made about unemployed people.

"the vast majority of people were very keen to work – most would be willing to accept pretty well any job"

Full-time work

All but four people said that they would accept a full-time job – most commenting on the prospect with real enthusiasm:



The four who would not accept full-time work included a lone parent and a disabled person, who were both looking for part-time hours to fit in with their responsibilities.

Part-time work

Even though most people wanted full-time work the majority (eighteen out the thirty interviewed) said that they would accept a job of less than 20 hours a week. They mentioned that it would be better than not working at all and could be a stepping stone. It is worth noting that for some people a job of less than 20 hours would mean they would be worse off in work – yet still, more than half were willing to take such a job.

The ten people who would not accept a part-time job all said it was because they would not earn enough from working to meet their household bills. The current rules on Working Tax Credit – which tops up low earnings – require single people aged 25 – 59 years to work at least 30 hours a week, couples with children to work at least 24 hours in total with one person working at least 16 hours a week, and lone parents to work at least 16 hours a week. Anyone accepting working hours of less than these thresholds will be significantly worse off in work.

Craig's story

Craig is in his early 20s and has had to move back in to his mother's home as he was unable to afford the shortfall in Housing Benefit on the 3-bedroom house he previously rented. He's currently receiving £90 a fortnight in Job Seekers' Allowance, as a contribution to a fine is being deducted. He gives his mother £40-50 p.w. leaving him with £25 a week for all his day to day expenses.

Craig is looking for work in the security industry, but is very reluctant to accept a temporary or zero hours contract as he has previously had a bad experience:

I applied for [a job] and ... I signed a contract saying I'd work up to 40 hours a week, and then I told the job centre and 'cos I'd already signed [the contract] they made me sign off that day. I signed off that day and I didn't have money for two and a half weeks 'cos they never rung me back.

Craig's benefits have been sanctioned three times, most recently because he forgot his Universal Job Match username and had difficulty accessing the site without it.

Flexible hours or commission-only

A much lower number – only five people – said that they would accept a flexible or zero hours job. Only four were willing to accept a commission-only job. The rest, particularly people with dependent children, were unable to live with the risks of having no guaranteed income.

I need to work 30 hours a week to have rent, council tax and to cover bills - I turned Argos down for zero hour contract job.

No - I have done this before with [an agency] – I signed off, got no benefits for 2 weeks and no work from [the agency].

Shift or dirty work

The great majority of interviewees were very willing to accept 'unsocial' jobs such as shift or dirty work. Twenty one said they'd be happy to work shifts, some mentioning that they had done this for many years, and three more said that they would be willing to work shifts but not nights. The same number, twenty one, said that they would be happy to work in a dirty job e.g. a meat processing plant. Most were quite willing to do so:

I don't mind getting my hands dirty

I'll do anything that's permanent

The handful of people who would not accept a dirty job were looking for a different kind of role e.g. customer service.




A Work Club customer gets his SIA certificate

Work outside the area e.g. Cwmbran

When asked if they would accept a job outside the area, e.g. in Cwmbran, people give mixed answers. It is worth noting that Winchestown to Cwmbran is 15.6 miles, taking 34 minutes by car. By public transport, it involves 15 minutes walk to Brynmawr bus station and a 75 minute bus journey – a total of 90 minutes. Since undertaking this research the Brynmawr – Cwmbran bus service has been withdrawn, making this journey almost impossible by public transport.

Twelve people gave an unqualified 'yes' to the prospect of a job elsewhere. The majority, however, were less certain because they were not sure if they could get there by public transport. Some also mentioned that they would need their wages to cover the costs of getting to and from work.



*Yes, as long as I can get to it
Driving is holding me back, if I could drive
I would get a job tomorrow*

Conclusion

The recession has hit Blaenau Gwent extremely hard – nowhere can lose so many jobs and not face very real problems. We found absolutely no evidence at all that people did not want to work. Instead we found the great majority were willing to do pretty well anything, whether it was shifts, dirty work or part-time work. A minority were constrained by their circumstances such as being disabled, but more were limited by lack of transport to opportunities outside the area. The one thing people were not able to do was accept work that did not offer a reasonable prospect of having enough to live on, such as commission-only or zero hours contracts.

3. HELP FINDING WORK

This section looks at the help people need when they are looking for a job, and their experiences of the help they've received.

'Distance' from the labour market

How ready people are to take up a job is sometimes described as their 'distance from the labour market' – people who are the least ready are the furthest away. It was clear that some individuals in the North Ebbw Fach Cluster are some distance from the labour market, often because they have not worked for some time, or because they lack qualifications or up-to-date skills.

“twenty one out of thirty people had been out of work for a year or more, with seven people not having worked for more than five years”

Long-term unemployment is much more common in Blaenau Gwent than elsewhere - nearly four out of ten (39.5%) of Job Seekers Allowance claimants have been unemployed for more than a year, compared with 28.6% in Wales. In the Work Club, an even higher proportion was long-term unemployed - twenty one out of thirty people had been out of work for a year or more, with seven people not having worked for more than five years

(for example because they had been previously considered too disabled to work).

Not having recent experience is a significant barrier to getting work. Not only have people's skills and aptitudes got out of date but prospective employers do not have evidence of individuals' capabilities at work. Some individuals may *never* have worked, or have not worked for very many years. For these people, finding a job in any labour market would be tough – it is exceptionally challenging when there are already thousands of other job seekers.



The Work Club in action

Pam's story

Pam has been looking for work for nearly 12 months, after being made redundant from a outdoor leisure company and a career in the army. She's single and in her 50s. Pam manages on £68 a week Jobseekers' Allowance - £3 a week is deducted because she receives a small private pension – and uses £20 a week of this to make up a shortfall on her housing benefit. Friends and relatives help her out.

Pam is looking for full-time work which she needs to cover her living costs, but finds that the majority of jobs in retail are for 25 hours a week which, at the Minimum Wage, does not generate enough to live on.

She is willing to travel and has a car (courtesy of family) but feels that her age and where she lives are real barriers. She is a keen job seeker, visiting her local library regularly, but does not yet have a set number of jobs to apply for nor have her benefits been sanctioned.

Many people who have not worked for some time do not have an up-to-date CV, or may not even know how to produce one. Some may not have had to look for work previously, or may have relied on looking for work through word of mouth or formal advertising rather than using new methods such as the internet or social media.

There is an additional issue of basic skills and qualifications. According to the 2011 Census, a third of unemployed people in Blaenau Gwent have no qualifications at all, compared with 17% of employed people. Our project did not ask people about their qualifications but a number mentioned that they were not qualified for the jobs on the Universal Job Match website:

I'm not qualified for half the things on there

Qualifications are a problem which prevent me from getting a lot of jobs. In Aldi's I can't even get past the qualifications section.

Some people said they experienced practical difficulties accessing the online job searches e.g. because they did not have computer skills or had conditions such as dyslexia.

I'm unable to use a computer without assistance.

I'm dyslexic so I can't do it without help.

These are all additional barriers to finding a job, on top of the already acute shortage of opportunities.

Peter's story

Peter is in his 50s and worked as a painter and decorator for the same company for 30 years before he was made redundant. He was unemployed for 5 years, then accepted a job 12 months ago that lasted only a few weeks. He has been unemployed since.

Peter has been sanctioned several times for not using the internet to look for work, but he has no computer skills and no computer at home. He is currently attending an 8-week long course to improve his IT abilities but finds it of little help. "I just sign the book to say I'm there and that's it", he said. He uses the time to look for the three jobs he is expected to apply for each week, but doesn't know how he will manage when the course finishes.

Help finding work

We asked people what help they had received to find work and which kind of help they had found most useful.

Job Centre

Three people said that the Job Centre had been helpful, but the great majority were not at all complimentary. They mentioned that they rarely saw the same advisor, that the advice received was unhelpful (e.g. being told to look for work or get a job). Several felt that Job Centre staff did not listen to their needs – some mentioned that offers of help e.g. Work Trial had not materialised. None of the people involved in the focus group had had good experiences at the Job Centre – they all mentioned having been given incorrect information, experienced repeated changes to appointments which sometimes resulted in job seekers having to wait for several hours, or had not received letters and so had missed appointments. In addition to all this, they did not feel that they were treated with respect by Job Centre staff, and found that there was no meaningful help given to them.

Work Programme

People had mixed views about help received via the Work Programme although only about half had undergone it. Six people said that Work Programme providers had been helpful, for example improving their CV, helping them with literacy and numeracy, or providing work experience.

However the rest were negative, with some describing the programme as 'rubbish' or 'crap', saying that there was no useful training available, and that the help with job search was limited or that it was not suited to their needs. The people in the focus group suggested that because Work Programme providers received payment for getting a job seeker into work, they were pushed into applying for unsuitable employment, in particular temporary or flexible hours jobs. Instead, they felt they needed reasonably permanent jobs with near full-time hours in order to be able to provide for their families reliably.

Work Club

The Work Club aims to equip people with a range of practical and employability skills. It is a multi-agency approach involving JobCentre Plus, Tai Calon, Blaenau Gwent Digital Inclusion, QWEST, Workers' Educational Association, Oxfam, Hafan Cymru, MIND and Blaenau Gwent library services who pool resources to provide the service.

The club runs across three venues within the Cluster. Each offers public access to computers and Wifi, with staff available to help find employment and training opportunities. Training needs are identified through one to one discussions and gaps in CVs, and suitable provision made. Staff also help Work Club participants to use the internet independently, to prepare and submit job applications, write CVs, access training and with interview skills. The Work Club receives regular information about job opportunities and changes to benefits from Job Centre Plus.

The Work Club also acts as a gateway for crisis support such as food bank, financial management advice and housing support.



At the Job Fayre

Dafydd's story

Dafydd's in his early 20s and hasn't had a permanent job since he left college. He has a partner and two children. He is currently participating in the Work Programme which he says is not helping him at all. He is keen to find work in either the security or construction industries, but lacks either an SIA or CSCS card. He'd also be willing to retrain at college but could not do so without finance.

He said that the Work Programme provider did not help him, for example by contributing to the cost of an SIA license:

"They done nothing for me, not one thing. I just go to avoid sanctions."

He feels under significant pressure to find a job, with sanctions an ever-present threat. He feels he doesn't need to be encouraged, just given practical support:

"They're cracking a whip that don't need to be cracked."

All but three people said that the Work Club had been very helpful (of the three who did not say this, one did not comment, one was attending for the first time when interviewed, and one had forgotten to attend a course). People we interviewed were highly complimentary about the help they had received, mentioning help with preparing CVs, organising visits to a job fayre, help with literacy, numeracy and IT skills, and job-specific training e.g. to get an SIA (Security Industry Authority) licence.

They are the best. [They] taught me how to do my CV and put it onto the computer, given lots of help with the job search site etc., and training courses

[They] helped to build my first decent CV, which I have had responses from. Also, my SIA license which I have had a job reply from and someone approached me about a security contract. I think it should be compulsory to have somewhere like Work Club where you get help, rather than Work Programme where they don't help you with training.

People we interviewed also felt that the Work Club was more sympathetic to their needs and circumstances – they felt they were treated respectfully and that the help was practical. Support to acquire an SIA license so that job seekers could apply to work in the security industry was particularly welcome – the cost being prohibitive to job seekers themselves.

Unfortunately individuals participating in the Work Programme were not able to use the Work Club's services, which was a frustration for a small number of individuals who wanted to undergo training the latter provided.

Friends and family

Friends and family helped most of those interviewed, for example letting them know if they heard of a vacancy or helping with lifts to interviews:

[My] Mam's friend is trying to help me to get job in a factory

Friends are trying to get me a part-time security job

Further Help

Most people we interviewed could not identify any further help that they needed with looking for work – they were content with the current support provided by the Work Club. The main request from people who did comment was for more training, ranging from help with literacy and numeracy and help with IT to help getting SIA licenses and CITB certificates. Two people suggested that mock interviews would be helpful and one suggested work experience.

Conclusion

A substantial minority of people looking for work in Blaenau Gwent, and in the Communities First area, have been out of work for some time, sometimes for many years. This, and other challenges such as lack of qualifications, are a very significant barrier to finding a job. It is very disappointing to find so many people had negative experiences of the Job Centre and Work Programme providers, not least as millions of pounds are spent on these services. Some people did find them helpful, but not the majority. What people seemed to like was help on their terms – help that was flexible, that met their varied needs, was not linked to their benefits and, perhaps most important of all, that treated them with respect.

4. LIVING ON A LOW INCOME

Some of the most radical changes to welfare benefits in a generation are being introduced. A combination of moving people deemed able to work off disability benefits, tough conditionality on those who are unemployed and considerable reductions in the value of benefits is intended to 'incentivise' people into employment. This new welfare regime is being imposed irrespective of people's employment prospects, personal circumstances or the conditions in the local labour market. In Blaenau Gwent, with high unemployment and limited employment opportunities, it is having a significant impact.

Impact of sanctions

We asked 30 people whether they or anyone in their household had had their benefits reduced or sanctioned in the last year. Eight of the twenty nine who received benefits had been sanctioned in the last year, usually for missing appointments or not making enough job searches. In addition, six had had their benefits reduced, mainly because of a reduction in benefit because of the 'bedroom tax' or paying back Crisis Loans or previous benefit over-payments.

"The new welfare regime is being imposed irrespective of people's employment prospects, personal circumstances or the conditions in the local labour market."

The issue of sanctions was explored in more depth in the case studies, with three of the five people we talked to having been sanctioned at least once. All those affected felt that sanctions had been imposed arbitrarily: they said that they were sanctioned for missing appointments even though the letter notifying them of the date and time arrived after the appointment itself, for losing their Universal Job Match username which meant that they could not log in to demonstrate their job search, for problems with internet access, or because they had been given incorrect information by one Job Centre advisor only to be sanctioned by another. They were angered by what they perceived to be their unfair treatment by Job Centre staff, but felt powerless to challenge the decisions as an appeal simply prolonged the period that they were without benefits.

It was far from clear that sanctions had the effect of encouraging people to get a job. At least two of the three people interviewed in depth who had been sanctioned felt that they were already very active in looking for work and couldn't do much more. They felt they were penalised for administrative problems not lack of willingness or effort. We heard that when individuals were sanctioned, the severe problems caused by the complete loss of income actually distracted people from learning and looking for work – they simply could not concentrate if they were cold or hungry, still less afford a bus fare to visit prospective employers.



Managing on a low income

Despite the media headlines, most out-of-work benefits are very low. Being out of work is virtually a guarantee of living in poverty. The people we interviewed all had extremely limited resources. Only two people could afford to eat fresh fruit and vegetables every day and only five said that they

could afford to heat their homes adequately. Only three had money put by for emergencies. About half had each of a warm winter coat, two pairs of shoes or could afford to eat two meals a day.

The people interviewed in depth described how they really struggled to make ends meet. The young men interviewed very rarely used the bus – they walked everywhere, often many miles, rather than spend money on bus fare. They regularly walked from Winchestown to Ebbw Vale, a round trip of 6 miles, rather than spend £4.20 on the return bus fare. Several managed only with the help of friends and family, who would provide help in the case of emergencies, including sanctions. Most shared resources, whether it was the occasional lift, special offers, or wifi at home. They were acutely aware that the struggle to afford the bare essentials meant that treats were out – one explained how difficult it was to explain to his daughter that an ice cream costing £1.20 when they went to the park lasted only 5 minutes, whereas a loaf of bread costing the same amount would last a few days.

Conclusions

The high levels of poverty we found amongst the people we interviewed are not surprising given the relatively low level of social security benefits. People's general shortage of money was made very much worse by sanctions which they felt were imposed in an arbitrary way. Neither their low incomes nor sanctions seemed to make people even keener to find work – they already wanted to work and lack of money seemed to make it harder not easier to find it.

5. THE CHALLENGE

This report illustrates the scale of the challenge faced in Blaenau Gwent and the massive task for the Communities First prosperous team in the North Ebbw Fach Cluster. They are battling with not only helping people who are some distance from the job market, but also with the weakest local economy in Wales.

The recession resulted in an extraordinarily high rate of job loss from Blaenau Gwent's numerous factories and service industries, with a corresponding increase in unemployment. At the same time, changes in the labour market itself, in particular the growth of flexible hours and temporary employment, have made it even more difficult for people to find sustainable work. In this climate it is not surprising that some people do not have the skills, experience or personal attributes needed to find and keep a job against competition for thousands of others – often several hundred compete for a single job.

Our research has shown that the vast majority of people interviewed are keen to work. Most are willing to do almost any work – be it shift work, dirty work or work outside the area. The one thing that they are not able and willing to do is accept flexible hours or commission-only jobs – precisely that area of the labour market that has been booming. They did not say this because they were unwilling to get a job but simply because they need a reasonably secure income to support themselves and their families.



IT Skills at the Work Club

The findings on the help unemployed people receive to find work are revealing. Some did find that the 'Work Programme' had been helpful, but those who did not were generally scathing about its quality and benefits. In particular, they felt that the very specific help they needed – such as getting access to an area of relatively unskilled work e.g. security or construction – was not forthcoming. On top of this, most job seekers felt threatened by sanctions, especially as they felt sanctions were often imposed arbitrarily, and poorly treated by officialdom. The one source of help about which job seekers were universally positive was the Work Club – they felt it met their needs and supported them as individuals.

We found that the Work Club makes a very positive contribution in a tough climate and, without question, supports dozens of individuals who would otherwise be left under pressure and without hope. It is unrealistic to expect the Work Club to solve the bigger problems of a weak local economy and the wider trend towards flexible and short hours of work, but within what is possible it is worth repeating the words of one person – 'they are the best'. However it will only achieve its full potential if there is a sustained improvement in the wider job market of Blaenau Gwent, and much better public transport to opportunities elsewhere.

