



# Closing the gender skills gap

A National Skills Forum report on women, skills and productivity

February 2009



*National  
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# 1. Foreword by Gordon Marsden MP



This report proposes ways to close the gender skills gap and remove the barriers faced by many women who wish to develop or fully utilise their skills. Increasing the range and level of women's skills will help combat the UK skills deficit, improve UK productivity and reduce the pay and opportunity gap between men and women. In bringing together the skills agenda and the equalities agenda, this report seeks to throw fresh light on both and explore how decisions taken in one area may impact on the other.

*Closing the Gender Skills Gap* focuses on three areas. Firstly, the report discusses ways to reduce occupational segregation and tackle skill shortages by increasing the number of women in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as science, engineering and technology. The report argues that at present there is insufficient access to careers education and guidance which challenges traditional assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.

Secondly, the report examines work-life balance. Women often take time out of the labour market because of parenting or caring commitments. Time away from the workforce limits the capacity for on-the-job learning and skill development. The report proposes ways to make life easier for those who wish to combine parenting or caring commitments with work. Despite some progress, more can be done to promote flexible working and a workplace culture that does not penalise those who need to balance a range of commitments. We must move beyond the assumption that the only options for parents and carers are full-time work or remaining out of the workforce completely.

Thirdly, the report explores ways to ensure that the adult education and training system fully engages women. Any increase or decrease in the availability of adult education has a disproportionately large impact on the lives and opportunities of women. Prior to the 1990s, boys out-achieved girls at school and university and this historic difference in educational achievement is evident in the qualification levels of those now in the workforce. When adults are given the chance to make up for opportunities missed out on in the past, women particularly stand to benefit.

I would like to thank everybody who participated in the research, especially the individual women who feature in this report as case studies. Particular thanks also go to our sponsors Investors in People, Ufi, the City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development, the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) and the Institute of Legal Executives (ILEX). We are very grateful to them for their sponsorship of this research and their contribution over the years to the National Skills Forum and Associate Parliamentary Skills Group.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gordon Marsden". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Gordon Marsden MP  
Chair, Associate Parliamentary Skills Group

## 2. Foreword by Dame Ruth Silver DBE



There has been extensive research on the gender pay gap, much of which identifies barriers to women learning new skills as a cause of pay disparity. This report focuses more closely on women's skills, exploring ways to remove barriers to learning.

In recent years there has been considerable progress towards addressing the gender skills gap. Skills has become ever more prominent on the political agenda, which can only be good for women who missed out in the past and now need to develop their capabilities. Programmes like Train to Gain, allowing employees to learn new skills through their employer, will be of great benefit to many women. Meanwhile extensions of the right to request flexible working are to be welcomed. Flexible working allows women to carry on at work,

developing their skills, at the same time as managing parenting or caring commitments. This is good for businesses and it is good for families.

Despite substantial progress, more needs to be done. During this research it has become apparent that, although we have achieved much for women already in work, there has been little progress in helping women trying to re-enter the workforce. Train to Gain benefits women already in work, but we also need to progress and recognise ways of helping women without jobs to develop their skills. Here we make a number of recommendations that would help in this regard, for example increased investment in adult and community learning.

Similarly, whilst women who are already in work will benefit greatly from new rights to request flexible working, there is little help as yet for women looking to re-enter work. Many job advertisements state that work hours are 9 to 5. This is impractical for many potential applicants, for example those whose children finish school earlier in the afternoon. Here we make a radical recommendation for a new law on employee recruitment that would effectively embed the right to request flexible working within the recruitment process.

As the economic downturn hits, and unemployment figures rise, it becomes increasingly important to support women looking to re-join the workforce. We must ensure women have access to education and training so they have the opportunity to update their skills for a changing world. We need to ensure availability of job opportunities that allow women to work flexibly.

My thanks go to everyone who took part in the research, particularly the women who told us their stories. All of the women described in this report have successfully developed new skills. Their commitment to learning reminds us that achieving change is always as much about fostering a culture of learning as it is about the structures put in place.



Dame Ruth Silver DBE  
Women and Work Commission



# Executive summary

## 3. Executive summary

### 3.1 Introduction

This report proposes ways to close the gender skills gap. The gender skills gap is damaging the UK economy and the Women and Work Commission estimate that closing it could increase gross domestic product (GDP) by between £15 and £23 billion annually.<sup>1</sup> Closing the gender skills gap would also reduce the pay and opportunity gap between men and women.

Women are less likely than men to train and work in certain sectors of the economy such as science, engineering and technology (SET). There are significant skills shortages in SET and these would be alleviated were female participation in these sectors increased. This report proposes ways to achieve this in the section entitled 'occupational segregation'.

Women take more time out of work than men to look after children or adults in need of care, leaving less time in work for on-the-job skills development. This report proposes ways to help women who wish to combine family life with ongoing work in the section entitled 'work-life balance'.

Until recent decades men out-achieved women at school and university; this historic difference means that, amongst the adult workforce, men tend to be better qualified than women. This report proposes ways to help women who wish to take courses and gain new qualifications in the section entitled 'adult education and training'.

### 3.2 Methodology

This report is based on a series of individual interviews with parliamentarians, employers and female employees. These interviews were followed by a roundtable discussion with experts including ministers, MPs, business representatives, learning providers, unions and policy groups.

### 3.3. Occupational segregation

Fewer women than men study or work in the SET sectors. In 2006/7, only 2.6% of engineering apprentices were women.<sup>2</sup> The limited number of women entering SET exacerbates skills shortages in these sectors, reducing the productivity of SET organisations and making it harder for them to compete on the international stage.

Participants in our research suggested a number of actions that Government could take that would result in more women entering non-traditional sectors. These focused on using careers education and guidance (CEG) and the media to challenge individuals' assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.

SET employers also have a role to play in reducing occupational segregation. They can make a difference by transforming recruiting practices and workplace culture.

#### 3.3.1 Careers education and guidance

Connexions is the agency charged with providing careers guidance for young people. At present only 40% of young people receive an individual, face-to-face careers guidance session with a Connexions advisor.<sup>3</sup> This means that there are no opportunities for advisors to challenge many young people's gendered assumptions about job roles. However, even when Connexions does provide young people with careers guidance, evidence suggests that it is not always doing enough to challenge gender stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to address these problems, the Government has transferred responsibility for delivery of the service from Connexions Partnerships to local authorities. However, participants questioned whether this would result in an increase in the quantity

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1 *Shaping a Fairer Future* (Women and Work Commission, 2006), p.vii

2 *Still More (Better Paid) Jobs for the Boys: Apprenticeships and Gender Segregation* (TUC, 2008), p.5

3 *Policy Commentary 9* (Careers England, 2008)

4 *Implementation of 14-19 Reforms: an Evaluation of Progress* (Ofsted, 2008)

and quality of careers guidance. They argued that problems have not resulted from the wrong bodies being responsible for the service, but because of the limited resources providers have been given and the overly ambitious remit for Connexions. As well as providing careers guidance, Connexions is expected to advise young people on a range of other issues such as drugs and relationships.

**Recommendation 1: The Government should remove responsibility for careers guidance from Connexions' remit and introduce a well-funded, specialised careers guidance service for young people. This would allow for greater focus on ensuring careers guidance challenges young people's assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.**

Participants discussed what the new careers guidance service should offer, a number proposing that it should act as a conduit linking young people with those in industry. The service could put young people in contact with role models working in non-traditional sectors. Although Connexions does currently make some efforts to link young people directly with employers, there was great willingness amongst employers that took part in our research to become more involved with careers guidance and efforts to reduce occupational segregation. This was the case both amongst large employers but also small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

**Recommendation 2: The new careers guidance service for young people should act as a conduit, linking young people with employers. Many SET employers would welcome increased opportunities to meet with young people and promote their sector to non-traditional entrants.**

Careers coordinators are those with overall responsibility for careers guidance at a school. This role is often taken on part-time by a subject teacher. Estimates suggest that as many as 50% of careers coordinators have no qualifications in careers guidance and therefore will not have received training in how to challenge young people's assumptions about gender roles.<sup>5</sup> Participants argued that this must change.

**Recommendation 3: The Government should provide funding for a full-time careers coordinator in every school and ensure that careers coordinators are appropriately trained. A key component of the training should be ways to challenge young people's assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.**

Form and subject teachers in schools are increasingly being asked to help pupils make decisions about learning and careers. However, as participants in our research observed, teachers do not receive relevant training. As a result they have not been taught how to ensure that they challenge gendered assumptions about jobs roles.

**Recommendation 4: The Government should ensure that form and subject teachers receive training in careers guidance, either as part of Initial Teacher Training or Continued Professional Development. A key component of the training should be ways to challenge young people's assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.**

Work experience is usually organised by schools, which either allocate placements or advise pupils on finding their own placements. It is likely that pupils asked to find their own placements will do so based on gender stereotypes about job roles. There is also evidence to suggest that when schools allocate placements they do so based on traditional assumptions about gender roles.<sup>6</sup> Little has been done to address these problems, with recent guidelines on provision of work experience making no mention of gender issues.

**Recommendation 5: The Government should re-issue work experience guidelines, stating in them that schools should encourage pupils to go on placements in non-traditional sectors.**

<sup>5</sup> *Inspiration and Aspiration: Realising our Potential in the 21st Century* (Skills Commission, 2008), p.33

<sup>6</sup> *Free to Choose: Tackling Gender Barriers to Better Jobs* (EOC, 2005), p.5

The adult advancement and careers service will be introduced from 2010 to provide careers guidance. As yet the Government has laid out no plans as to how it will make sure that this new service encourages women to consider the full range of options available to them, including careers in SET. Participants argued that this needs to be addressed as plans for the new service continue to develop.

**Recommendation 6: The forthcoming common service standards and workforce development strategy for the new adult advancement and careers service should include measures to ensure that advisors working for the new service challenge individuals' assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.**

All-age careers guidance services are provided by other countries such as New Zealand and also in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Some participants argued that careers guidance in England would improve were it provided by an all-age service, catering for both young people and adults. Separate services for young people and adults can result in individuals not knowing where to go for advice once they become adults. When women miss out on careers guidance for this reason, there is no opportunity to challenge any gendered assumptions about job roles that they hold. The Government has ruled out introducing an all-age service, but the option of combining services for young people and adults should be kept under review.

**Recommendation 7: The Government should keep the option of introducing an all-age careers service under review.**

### **3.3.2 Changing cultural attitudes**

Broadcasters can have a significant impact on individuals' assumptions about gender roles in the workforce. Research suggests that the media often either fails to portray women in SET or portrays them unsympathetically. Participants in the research observed that it would be helpful were broadcasters to positively portray women in SET.

**Recommendation 8: Broadcasters should ensure that programmes include positive portrayals of women working in science, engineering and technology.**

A media campaign challenging individuals' assumptions about gender roles in the workforce could have considerable impact on career decisions.

**Recommendation 9: The Government, or government agencies, should introduce a high profile campaign challenging gendered attitudes to careers.**

### **3.3.3 Employer best practice**

Alongside Government, SET employers will play a crucial role in reducing occupational segregation. BT takes a range of approaches. These include:

- Advertising job opportunities in places and media likely to reach women.
- Ensuring that job opportunities are advertised in ways which will encourage women to consider applying, for example by providing positive case studies about current female employees.
- Including stipulations in recruiting agencies' contracts that they must target potential female applicants.
- Ensuring that work culture is conducive to new and existing female employees staying with the organisation.

### 3.4 Work-life balance

Women often take time out of work to look after children or adults in need of care. In doing so, they make a valuable contribution to families, communities and society. Time away from work does however limit capacity for on-the-job skills development.

Participants in our research discussed ways in which Government can help to address this by supporting women who wish to keep engaged with work at the same time as managing parenting or caring commitments. In addition they stressed that it is important to ensure that legislation challenges rather than reflects societal assumptions that women should be more involved in parenting and caring than men.

Employers also have a role to play in ensuring women are able to balance parenting and caring commitments with ongoing career and skills development, for example by ensuring availability of a wide range of flexible working options.

#### 3.4.1 Maternity and paternity leave

Participants expressed concern that extensions to maternity leave over the past decade, without corresponding increases in paternity leave, have resulted in women taking more time out of the workforce than men. Some employers recruit or promote men ahead of women because women are likely to take more time off after having children. This limits opportunities for women to progress in the workplace and develop skills.

Currently mothers are entitled to 39 weeks paid maternity leave and fathers are entitled to up to two weeks paid paternity leave. After forthcoming reforms, mothers will be able to take up to 52 weeks paid maternity leave; however, after the first 26 weeks of the leave parents will be able to transfer the remaining 26 weeks of leave to the father.

Participants welcomed the forthcoming reforms, recognising them as an effort by the Government to reduce disparity in the length of leave taken by new mothers and new fathers. However, they noted that other countries which have introduced schemes whereby leave can be transferred between parents have not seen a great increase in the amount of leave taken by men. Substantial change has only been achieved in countries where fathers are offered a portion of parental leave on a non-transferable basis.

Participants in the research suggested that a similar system ought to be introduced in the UK. Fathers should each be entitled to an additional four weeks of paid leave which cannot be transferred to the mother.

**Recommendation 10: The Government's planned changes to the system of maternity and paternity leave ought to be amended to include an additional four weeks of non-transferable paid leave for fathers.**

It is important to help women to return to work following maternity leave. Participants argued that increasing the level of contact between women on maternity leave and their employer will ease women's subsequent transition back into work. It was noted that many employers are unsure of the laws concerning contacting parents on leave, have not considered ways that they can use Information Technology to keep women informed of developments at work and are not aware of the introduction of 'Keep in Touch Days'.

**Recommendation 11: The Government should help employers to understand the laws concerning contacting women on maternity leave and disseminate information on how organisations can use Information Technology and 'Keep in Touch Days' to keep new mothers informed of developments at work.**

### 3.4.2 Childcare

Participants welcomed increased financial help towards the costs of childcare, which has enabled many women with young children to stay in work, developing their skills. However, participants observed that the complexity of the existing mechanisms for provision of financial help towards childcare costs means that many parents are not receiving as much financial help as they might need.

Participants argued that existing help with childcare costs, which is spread across a range of funding mechanisms, should be replaced by a simple childcare voucher system available to all parents with young children. A simpler system would require less Government bureaucracy to manage.

**Recommendation 12: The Government should introduce a childcare voucher scheme, available to all parents of children under five, whereby vouchers can be used in place of payment across a range of types of childcare. The voucher scheme should replace existing funding mechanisms providing help with childcare costs.**

Participants observed that mothers can find it difficult to organise childcare at the times when they are required to work. This could be addressed by ensuring the availability of a wide range of childcare options, including childminding. Participants expressed concern at the downward trend in the number of registered childminders and suggested that the Government should explore ways of reversing this downward trend, for example through financial incentives or campaigns promoting childminding as a career.

**Recommendation 13: The Government should explore ways of reversing the downward trend in the number of registered childminders.**

### 3.4.3 Carers

Carers look after ill or disabled friends or family members. 57% of carers are women. Evidence suggests that many carers would like to combine caring with work or education but are unable to do so.<sup>7</sup>

The main sources of Government financial support for carers are Income Support and the Carer's Allowance. Until recently, the Government had planned to move carers from Income Support onto Jobseekers Allowance but, following the strong concern expressed by carers, no such move will be made until further investigations have been made into the impact that this will cause.<sup>8</sup> Participants welcomed this latest announcement but stressed that, given the inadequacies of the existing system, the Government should publish and adhere to a firm timetable outlining its next steps.

**Recommendation 14: The Government should publish and adhere to a firm timetable outlining the next steps that it will take towards reforming carers' benefits.**

### 3.4.4 The long hours culture

The UK has a culture in which individuals are expected to work long hours. This can make it difficult for women trying to balance work with parenting or caring commitments, deterring some women from working at all. Participants argued that the long hours culture must be challenged through increased enforcement of the Working Time Directive.

**Recommendation 15: The Government should ask the Health and Safety Executive and Local Authority Environmental Health departments to proactively enforce the Working Time Directive.**

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<sup>7</sup> *Valuing and Supporting Carers* (DWP Select Committee, 2008), p.15

<sup>8</sup> *Raising Expectations and Increasing Support: Reforming Welfare for the Future* (December, 2008), p.10

### 3.4.5 Flexible working

A key way of helping women with parenting or caring commitments to continue their career and skills development is to ensure the availability of flexible working, examples of which include part-time work, flexitime and job sharing. Parents of children under six and carers have a statutory right to request flexible working, with their employer obliged to accept their request unless the employer can make a business case for rejecting it. From April 2009 this right to request will be extended to parents of children aged up to sixteen.

Participants argued that the statutory right to request should be extended to cover all employees. By allowing as many employees as possible to work flexibly, not just parents and carers, the potential for friction between employees because of differences in treatment are reduced.

Participants advocated removing the stipulation that individuals must have been with their employer for more than six months in order to make a statutory request to work flexibly. This would benefit women with parenting or caring commitments who are starting in new jobs.

**Recommendation 16: The Government should extend the statutory right to request flexible working to all employees and remove the stipulation that individuals must have been with their employer for six months to be eligible to make a statutory request.**

Participants argued that, whilst the statutory right to request flexible working has been extremely beneficial for women with jobs, women looking to re-enter the workforce still face considerable difficulties. Many job advertisements ask for applications from individuals able to work between 9am and 5pm, five days a week. This is not possible for many women with parenting or caring commitments.

Once recommendation 16 has been introduced, further legislation should be passed so that organisations recruiting new employees cannot specify required working hours *beyond* those for which there is a clear business case. The employer and potential employee would then be able to negotiate a working arrangement that benefits both parties. In effect this would embed the right to request flexible working within the recruitment process.

**Recommendation 17: The Government should make it illegal for employers that are recruiting new employees to specify required working hours beyond those for which the employer can make a clear business case. The employer and potential employee would then be able to negotiate a working arrangement that benefits both parties.**

### 3.4.6 Employer best practice

Alongside Government, employers have a crucial role to play in ensuring that their workplace practice makes it possible for female employees to balance work with parenting or caring commitments. Actions that KMPG, West Midlands Police, Fulcrum Consulting and WOW Property have taken include:

- Ensuring that new parents on leave do not lose touch with developments at work.
- Ensuring that a culture of flexible working is embedded across the organisation by allowing as many employees as possible to work flexibly, not just parents and carers.
- Providing employees who would like to work from home with the facilities to do so.
- Assessing employees' performance based on outcomes, not the hours they spend at their desk.
- Recognising that mothers looking to return to work are an under-utilised cohort of often highly skilled workers.

### 3.5 Adult education and training

Women in their forties or older have on average fewer qualifications than their male counterparts. Prior to the 1990s, boys out-achieved girls at school and university and this historic difference in school and university achievement is evident amongst those now in the workforce.

The Government has set ambitious targets for increasing levels of qualifications amongst the UK workforce by 2020, recognising that increased skill levels result in increased productivity. As 70% of the 2020 workforce is already beyond the age of compulsory education, these targets will only be met by engaging adults – and particularly adult women – in learning.<sup>9</sup>

Participants discussed ways in which the Government can ensure that women from older age groups are able to develop new skills. They focused on ensuring wide availability of adult education and ensuring that the structure of courses and learning programmes meet women's particular learning needs.

Employers also have a role to play in ensuring women from older age groups are able to develop their skills and gain new qualifications, for example by ensuring that training programmes are available to everyone, irrespective of age.

#### 3.5.1 Equal access for adult learners

Education and training programmes have tended to focus on young people. Participants in the research argued that this has reduced the opportunities available to older women who wish to improve their skills. Individuals aged under 25 are entitled to free training for a first Level 3 qualification; those aged over 25 are not. As many women aged over 25 do not have Level 3 qualifications, they are particularly affected by the age cut-off.

**Recommendation 18: The Government should extend the entitlement to free training for a first Level 3 qualification to those aged over 25. This would be particularly beneficial to women, many of whom have missed out on opportunities to learn in the past.**

#### 3.5.2 Sector Skills Councils

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) play an important role in adult education, representing employers in their respective sectors. SSCs are currently being re-licensed. The framework for re-licensing does not state that assessments will take into account the efforts SSCs have made to engage women in learning.<sup>10</sup> Participants argued that this should be a key part of the re-licensing process.

**Recommendation 19: As part of the Sector Skills Council re-licensing process, Ministers, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and the National Audit Office should assess whether SSCs are fully considering the needs of female learners.**

#### 3.5.3 Train to Gain

An increasing proportion of the adult education budget is being invested in Train to Gain, which allows employers to train their staff with the costs of training being met by Government. The courses available through Train to Gain are stipulated in Sector Compacts. Participants argued that future negotiation of Sector Compacts should include an assessment of how effectively courses covered by Train to Gain cater for female learners.

**Recommendation 20: Future negotiation of Train to Gain Sector Compacts should include a gender impact assessment, ensuring that the courses made available through Train to Gain are effective at engaging female learners.**

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<sup>9</sup> Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the Global Economy – World Class Skills (HM Treasury, 2006), p.1

<sup>10</sup> Empowering SSCs – Employer Driven Skills Reform across the UK: A Relicensing Framework for Sector Skills Councils (UKCES, 2008)

### 3.5.4 Adult and community learning

Adult and community learning (ACL) takes place outside mainstream further education, work based learning or higher education. 77% of individuals enrolled in ACL are female.<sup>11</sup> The short, unaccredited courses that typically comprise ACL are effective at engaging women who have not received any education or training for a long time and need to be eased back into learning. Unlike Train to Gain, ACL also reaches women who are not in work. Given the economic downturn, it is vital to ensure that education and training programmes are available for this cohort of the population. Participants expressed disappointment that Government funding for ACL has reduced in recent years.

**Recommendation 21: The Government should reinvest in adult and community learning (ACL) as a key means of engaging hard-to-reach women and women out of work.**

### 3.5.5 Funding for students in further education

In 2005/6, 61% of adult learners in FE colleges and external institutions were female.<sup>12</sup> Participants observed that, whilst colleges are effective at attracting female learners, many more women might sign-up to courses if more financial support were available.

**Recommendation 22: Further education is very effective at engaging female learners. The Government should increase the financial support available to adult learners in further education.**

### 3.5.6 Apprenticeships

The Government plans to extend the availability of adult apprenticeships and has laid out a number of measures for ensuring that equality issues are taken into account as the apprenticeship programme expands.<sup>13</sup> However, these measures do not include ways to ensure wide availability of part-time apprenticeships. Participants noted that part-time apprenticeships would be attractive to many women whose childcare or caring commitments preclude full-time work.

**Recommendation 23: The Government should ask the National Apprenticeship Service to explore ways of increasing the number of part-time apprenticeships. This would benefit women looking to take apprenticeships but who are unable to commit to full-time work.**

### 3.5.7 Higher education

Participants argued that higher education should be engaging more mature female students as a means of reducing the gender skills gap. At present part-time students do not receive funding on the same terms as full-time students.<sup>14</sup> Participants argued that this counters efforts to engage mature female students who often prefer part-time study.

**Recommendation 24: The Government should offer part-time students in higher education funding arrangements on the same terms as full-time students. This would benefit women looking to enter higher education, but who are unable to commit to full-time study.**

11 Statistic provided by David Lammy MP in his interview for this research

12 *Ibid*

13 *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England* (DIUS, 2007)

14 *Mind the Gap: Funding Adults in Further and Higher Education* (National Skills Forum, 2008), pp.19ff

### 3.5.8 E-learning entitlement for new parents

Participants discussed ways of making sure that new mothers looking to re-enter the workforce after having children possess the skills that employers require. Although new mothers will often need to be at home with their child, more could be done using the internet to support new mothers who wish to update their skills.

**Recommendation 25: The Government should explore the possibility of funding new parents for an entitlement to free access to learndirect supported e-learning courses.**

### 3.5.9 Carers, benefits and learning

The Carer's Allowance and, in most cases, Income Support are not available to carers on educational courses that entail more than 21 hours a week of study. Participants argued that the 21-hour rule for recipients of the Carer's Allowance should be revoked. In addition they expressed concern that, for courses of less than 21 hours a week, recipients of the Carer's Allowance often find that they are ineligible for financial help with course costs.

**Recommendation 26: The Government should make the Carer's Allowance available to those on courses that require more than 21 hours a week of study and ensure that recipients of the Carer's Allowance are eligible for financial assistance on educational courses.**

### 3.5.10 Re-skilling

Following the Government's decision on equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs), full funding support is no longer available to those wishing to study for a qualification if they already have a qualification at that level. Participants argued that this will have a very negative impact on women. Women who achieved qualifications in their teens and twenties, but who have been out of the workforce for some years, often need to re-skill if they are to fulfil their potential in the workforce. As a result of the ELQ decision many women will not be able to update their skills.

**Recommendation 27: The Government should review its decision to stop fully funding equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs). The Government should assess a range of options including reversing the decision entirely and allowing individuals to study for an ELQ after a specified period of time has elapsed since they last achieved a qualification at that level.**

### 3.5.11 Employer best practice

Alongside Government, employers have a crucial role to play in ensuring women are able to develop their skills and gain new qualifications. Actions that B&Q have taken to improve their training and make it accessible to women include:

- Ensuring that training programmes are available to employees of all ages.
- Ensuring that training programmes are available to employees' working flexibly.
- Ensuring that skills development is linked to rewards, such as pay increases, to recognise employees' efforts in developing their skills.
- Ensuring availability of a range of methods of learning.
- Ensuring that, where possible, staff training leads to nationally-recognised qualifications.

# Introduction

## 4. Introduction

This research proposes ways to close the gender skills gap by removing barriers faced by many women who wish to develop their skills. The Women and Work Commission estimate that closing the gender skills gap could increase gross national product (GNP) by between £15 and £23 billion annually.<sup>15</sup> Addressing the gender skills gap would also reduce the pay and opportunity gap between men and women.

Women are less likely than men to train and work in certain sectors of the economy such as science, engineering and technology (SET). In 2006/7, only 2.6% of engineering apprentices were women and 1.3% of construction apprentices were women.<sup>16</sup> Many women who do gain SET qualifications do not then go on to follow careers in these sectors. There are significant skills shortages in SET and these would be alleviated were female participation in these sectors increased. This report proposes ways to achieve this in the section entitled 'occupational segregation'.

Women take more time out of work than men to look after children or adults in need of care. In doing so, they make a valuable contribution to families, communities and society. However, time away from the workforce limits the capacity for on-the-job learning and the acquisition of job-related skills.

Until recent decades men out-achieved women at school and university; this historic difference means that, amongst the adult workforce, men tend to be better qualified than women. For example, more than one third of women aged 55-64 have no qualifications compared to under a quarter of men.<sup>17</sup> This report proposes ways to help women who wish to take courses and gain new qualifications in the section entitled 'adult education and training'.

Government, employers and individuals will each have a part to play in closing the gender skills gap. This report includes: policy recommendations aimed mainly at the Government and its agencies; case studies about individual women who have succeeded in developing their skills; and employer case studies together with a series of suggestions for employer best practice.

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15 *Shaping a Fairer Future*, p.vii

16 *Still More (Better Paid) Jobs for the Boys*, p.5

17 *Shaping a Fairer Future*, p.51

## 5. The current policy landscape

This section provides an overview of Government policies which are relevant to the report on careers education and guidance, work-life balance and education and training.

### 5.1 Careers education and guidance

The Government has put in place a number of measures which aim to ensure that careers education and guidance reduce occupational segregation.

#### 5.1.1 Careers education for young people

Schools are statutorily required to provide careers education to all children in their charge aged between eleven and sixteen.<sup>18</sup> They do so as part of personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE).<sup>19</sup> The framework for delivery of careers education does not mention gender stereotyping specifically but does state that careers education should 'support inclusion, challenge stereotyping and promote equality of opportunity.'<sup>20</sup>

#### 5.1.2 Careers guidance for young people

Connexions provides careers guidance to young people and is run by local authorities or their contractors. Providers must adhere to quality standards which require written policies on challenging gender stereotyping.<sup>21</sup> The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has disseminated best practice case studies which include instances of local careers programmes actively challenging gender stereotypes.<sup>22</sup>

### 5.2 Work-life balance

The Government has a number of policies that affect women who combine work with childcare or caring commitments.

#### 5.2.1 Maternity and paternity leave

At present, mothers are entitled to 39 weeks paid maternity leave and fathers are entitled to up to two weeks paid paternity leave. Under incoming measures, mothers will be able to take up to 52 weeks paid maternity leave; however, after the first 26 weeks of leave, parents will be able to transfer the remaining 26 weeks of leave to the father.<sup>23</sup>

#### 5.2.2 Childcare for under fives

Sure Start is a programme run at a sub-national level with the aim of giving 'the best possible start in life for every child' through a range of services, one of which is childcare.<sup>24</sup>

The Early Years Education Entitlement allows all three and four year olds to receive twelve and a half hours free education per week. The Government is committed to extending this to fifteen hours, and the Prime Minister has said that the scheme might be extended to include two year olds.<sup>25</sup>

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18 The 1997 Education Act (Section 43) requires schools to provide careers education to all children over thirteen years of age; in September 2004 this was extended to include all children over eleven years of age.

19 *National Curriculum 2007* (Qualifications and Curriculum Agency, 2007)

20 *Careers Education and Guidance in England: A National Framework 11-19* (DfES, 2003)

21 *Quality Standards for Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)* (DCSF, 2007)

22 *Examples of How the Standards Are Being Met and Top Tips: Young People's Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)* (DCSF, 2007)

23 Answer to Written Parliamentary Question 136530 (20 June 2007)

24 See <http://www.surestart.gov.uk/>

25 Hansard 11 December 2007 Column 161; 'Brown reveals free childcare plan' (BBC website, 21 September 2008)

Parents can receive further support with childcare through Childcare Tax Credits. Childcare Tax Credits are part of Working Families Tax Credits and are paid to parents in money or offset against tax depending upon the tax status of the family.

In addition, for employees whose employer signs up to the scheme, there is a system of Childcare Vouchers whereby employees can agree to convert part of their salary into vouchers. These vouchers can then be used in place of payment for childcare.

Trial is beginning on a scheme whereby parents gain access to free childcare whilst they participate in training programmes. The scheme, which is called 'Free Childcare for Training and Learning for Work', will support 50,000 low income families in which one parent is working and the second wants to improve their skills so that they can return to work. Alongside free childcare, families will receive help from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) so that they are able to identify and attend training.<sup>26</sup>

### **5.2.3 Childcare for older children**

From 2010 all schools will be required to provide facilities to look after children between 8am and 6pm. This is known as 'extended services'. At present 49% of schools offer a full range of extended services.<sup>27</sup>

### **5.2.4 Carers**

Carers are defined as those providing unpaid care for the frail, ill or disabled. The main sources of Government financial aid for carers are Income Support and the Carer's Allowance. The Government is currently radically reforming the benefit system but has said that it will not make changes to carers' benefits until sure of the impact the changes will cause.<sup>28</sup>

### **5.2.5 Parents and carers returning to learning**

In the Government's recent White Paper *New Opportunities*, pilots have been announced for a scheme whereby individuals who have been out of the workforce for over five years because of parenting or caring commitments will be eligible to receive up to £500 to enable them to return to work.<sup>29</sup>

### **5.2.6 Part-time working**

The Part-time workers (prevention of less favourable treatment) Regulations 2000 make it unlawful for part-time workers to be treated less favourably than full-time workers.

The Government's Quality Part-Time Work Initiative aims to help employers set up part-time positions at senior levels and address the problem that over 50% of women in part-time positions are working below their skill level. The £500,000 of funding for this initiative is being invested in thirteen projects taking place across the UK.<sup>30</sup>

### **5.2.7 Flexible working**

Flexible working is defined as any working arrangement other than the standard working arrangement for employees in an organisation. For example, if most employees in an organisation work from the office between 9am and 5pm, an employee is working flexibly if he or she works from home in the afternoon.<sup>31</sup>

Carers and parents with children under six have a statutory right to request flexible working, with their employer obliged to accept such a request unless they can make a business case for rejecting it. This right to request will be extended to parents with children under sixteen from April 2009.<sup>32</sup>

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26 'Free childcare for 50,000 families' (DCSF website, 8 September 2008)

27 *Women's Changing Lives: Priorities for the Ministers for Women; One year on Progress Report* (GEO, 2008), p.23

28 *Raising Expectations and Increasing Support: Reforming Welfare for the Future* (DWP, 2008), p.10

29 *New Opportunities: Fair Chances for the Future* (HM Government, 2000), p.72

30 *Women's Changing Lives: Priorities for the Ministers for Women*, p.6

31 I. Walsh, *A Review of How to Extend the Right to Flexible Working to Parents of Older Children* (BERR, 2008)

32 See the Queen's Speech, 3 December 2008

### 5.3 Education and training

Education and training initiatives and measures relating specifically to female learners tend to be focused on encouraging women to follow non-traditional training paths.

#### 5.3.1 Diplomas

These new qualifications for 14-19 year olds will be delivered by consortia of local schools and colleges. As part of the process by which consortia apply for the right to deliver Diplomas, they must 'demonstrate that they have considered issues of equality and diversity with regard to Diploma delivery, and have identified actions to be taken to address any negative stereotypes and patterns.'<sup>33</sup>

#### 5.3.2 Apprenticeships

In 2007/08, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funded 8,000 apprenticeships for priority adult groups which included women seeking to pursue non-traditional careers.

A National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) will be formed in 2009. This will be given the resources to provide 'end-to-end accountability for the apprenticeship programme'.<sup>34</sup> The NAS has been asked to implement a programme of positive action to challenge occupational segregation in apprenticeships. For example, the NAS will appoint 'super-mentors' to support under-represented apprentices.<sup>35</sup>

#### 5.3.3 Higher education

The Aimhigher programme sets out to increase the participation of under-represented groups on university courses. Whilst the programme's primary focus is increasing participation amongst low income groups, local practitioners are asked to address other types of under-representation such as the shortage of women taking courses in science, engineering and technology.

#### 5.3.4 Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative

The Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative is targeted at women in non-traditional sectors, helping them learn new skills and plan their progression through their career. The programme has aided 8,000 women so far and the Government is committed to funding the initiative through until 2011.<sup>36</sup>

Delivered by nine Sector Skills Councils between 2006 and 2008, the Government invested a further £15 million to continue delivery of the programme through five SSCs for another three years.

The SSCs now running the programme are Asset Skills (cleaning and facilities management), Automotive Skills (automotive retail), Construction Skills (construction), Lantra (environment and land based industries) and Skillfast UK (fashion and textiles).

#### 5.3.5 The UK Resource Centre for Women in science, engineering and technology (UKRC)

The UKRC, funded by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), is the Government's lead organisation for the provision of advice, services and policy consultation regarding the under-representation of women in science, engineering and technology (SET).

As part of its remit the UKRC helps individual women in SET through provision of practical advice, training, grants, bursaries, mentoring and networking opportunities.

Services are available to women at all levels within the SET sectors, from those just starting on SET studies at college or university to senior women taking on positions of leadership.

33 *The Specialised Diploma Gateway (Annex 3)*

34 *World Class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All* (DCSF and DIUS, 2008), p.6

35 *Ibid*, p.50

36 '£5 million a year to help women get on at work' (DIUS website, 7 March 2008)

## 6. Research methodology

This research was carried out between May 2008 and January 2009. It is based on a series of interviews with individual parliamentarians, employers and female employees.

During the interviews with parliamentarians, participants were asked for their views on a range of issues including: the extent and repercussions of the gender skills gap; occupational segregation; work-life balance; adult education and training; discrimination against women; and the impact and direction of Government policy.

Employers were asked about the gender skills gap; the impact and direction of Government policy; and their own approach to gender issues in areas such as recruitment and flexible working.

Female employees were asked about the gender skills gap; the impact and direction of Government policy; and their experiences of skills and career development.

The interviews were followed by a roundtable discussion with Ministers, MPs, learning providers, business representatives, unions and expert policy groups. A list of participants in the interviews and roundtable can be found in Appendix 1.

# Occupational segregation

## 7. Occupational segregation

Fewer women than men take education and training programmes in the science, engineering and technology sectors (SET). In 2006/7, only 36.8% of SET undergraduates at UK higher education institutions were women.<sup>37</sup> In the same year, 2.6% of engineering apprentices were women and 1.3% of construction apprentices.<sup>38</sup>

A shortfall in the number of women training in SET, combined with the fact that high numbers of women with SET qualifications do not go on to work in SET sectors, means that women are under-represented in SET jobs. For example, in 2006, only 5.4% of engineering professionals were female.<sup>39</sup>

The limited number of women entering SET is exacerbating the severe skills shortages in these sectors.<sup>40</sup> The Confederation of British Industry reports that 59% of businesses that require SET workers are facing difficulties recruiting.<sup>41</sup>

Participants suggested a number of ways of overcoming societal assumptions about gender roles in the workforce. These focused on careers education and guidance (CEG) and using the media to challenge cultural assumptions about gender roles.

### 7.1 Careers Education and Guidance (CEG)

Participants in our research argued that CEG is failing to reduce gender segregation in education and career choice. They suggested that part of the problem is a lack of careers guidance. Tim Boswell MP, co-vice chair of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, said: "We mustn't place all the blame with careers advisors. We must also ask if the services they operate in provide advisors with the opportunities to deliver careers guidance to significant numbers of people. If not, then it is not careers advisors' fault that people tend to make careers choices along traditional lines." Only 40% of young people in England now receive an individual, face-to-face careers session with a Connexions advisor.<sup>42</sup> Adult services do not have a high profile. This means that there are few opportunities for individuals' ideas about gender roles in the workforce to be challenged.

However, participants also argued that, when careers education and guidance does take place, it often fails to challenge gender stereotypes. Barbara Follett MP, interviewed when she was Under-Secretary of State for Women, conceded: "The major barriers that exist for women entering into non-traditional industries are manifold, but can be identified in certain key areas, for example a lack of support from teachers and careers advisors when young."

Other countries have made considerable efforts to ensure that provision of CEG reduces occupational segregation, including Austria, Spain, the Netherlands and Germany.<sup>43</sup> As long ago as the 1980s, Austria set up special career guidance bodies for young women as part of efforts to reduce occupational segregation.<sup>44</sup>

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37 *Review May 2004 – April 2008: UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology* (UKRC, 2008), p.27

38 *Still More (Better Paid) Jobs for the Boys*, p.5

39 *Review May 2004 - April 2008*, p.26

40 See <http://www.ukrc4setwomen.org/>

41 *Taking stock: CBI Education and Skills Survey 2008* (CBI, 2008), p.29

42 *Policy Commentary 9* (Careers England, 2008)

43 *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap* (OECD, 2004), p.22

44 *OECD Review of Careers Guidance Policies: Austria Country Note* (OECD, 2003), p.8

### 7.1.1 Connexions

Connexions offers careers guidance to young people alongside advice on a range of other issues such as drugs and relationships. In 2005, the Government acknowledged that Connexions was failing to deliver careers guidance to many young people and that, when it was providing careers guidance, Connexions was failing to challenge gender stereotyping and young people's tendency to make traditional subject and career choices.<sup>45</sup> In an effort to address these inadequacies, responsibility for Connexions has recently been transferred to local authorities.

Participants in our research were not convinced that the transfer to local authorities would lead to increases in the quantity and quality of careers guidance. Tim Boswell MP emphasised a lack of funding as the root cause of inadequate careers guidance. He said: "There is a tendency to conclude that the fault lies with providers and, as a result, to try and bring about change by switching providers. This has a merry-go-round effect. Until the early nineties local authorities were responsible for careers guidance. Then responsibility was contracted out to the private sector. Then in 2001 it was transferred to Connexions Partnerships, and then in 2008 it went back to local authorities. Throughout, the problem has not been who runs careers guidance so much as how much funding they are given to do so."

Recent research by the Skills Commission has shown that funding for careers guidance has dropped by 16% since 2000/01 and that this decline is likely to continue following the transfer of responsibility to local authorities. A number of local authorities will be allocated reduced amounts of money for running Connexions in coming years and, as the funding allocation is not ring-fenced, local authorities may decide to commit the money towards other spending priorities.<sup>46</sup>

Participants also talked about the problems that arise when careers guidance is delivered alongside advice on other issues. Baroness Margaret Sharp of Guildford, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Innovation, Universities and Skills in the House of Lords, said: "One problem that emerges from this is around staffing. It is asking a lot of someone to advise young people on careers, in a non-gendered way, but also be able to help them with problems such as housing, pregnancy and drugs."

A recent Ofsted report assesses Connexions for the first time since transfer of responsibility to local authorities. The report notes that careers guidance is still failing to challenge assumptions about gender roles.<sup>47</sup>

Lorely Burt MP, Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, was strongly critical: "I think the advice that young people get is appalling. I don't think youth advisors think to put the full range of options in front of young people even at a time when many companies are looking to employ people in non-traditional roles."

To address these problems, participants suggested removing careers guidance from Connexions' remit. John Hayes MP, Conservative Shadow Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, said: "It is difficult for Connexions to focus on issues within careers guidance, such as gendered advice, because it is difficult for Connexions to focus on careers guidance at all amongst the rest of its work."

Instead participants argued that careers guidance should be delivered by a well-funded, specialised careers service. This would allow for greater focus on ensuring careers guidance challenges young people's assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.

**Recommendation 1: The Government should remove responsibility for careers guidance from Connexions' remit and introduce a well-funded, specialised careers guidance service for young people. This would allow for greater focus on ensuring careers guidance challenges young people's assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.**

45 *End to End Review of Careers Education and Guidance* (DFES, 2005)

46 *Inspiration and Aspiration: Realising our Potential in the 21st Century* (Skills Commission, 2008), p.33

47 *Implementation of 14-19 Reforms: an Evaluation of Progress* (Ofsted, 2008)

Participants discussed what the new service should offer, a number arguing that the careers guidance service should act as a conduit linking young people with those in industry. Although Connexions does currently make efforts to link young people directly with employers, there was great willingness amongst employers that took part in our research to become more involved with careers guidance and efforts to reduce occupational segregation. Caroline Waters, Director of People and Policy at BT, said: "One of the problems with careers guidance is that, more often than not, the advisors don't have any experience of the jobs they're giving advice about. We need a careers service which links young people with individuals working in industry who can really tell them what to expect. If the service put girls in touch with women in non-traditional sectors, then that could really make a difference." Inspector Danielle Corfield from West Midlands Police made a similar point, observing: "The use of role models is a strong motivational factor."

Michelle Dow, Recruitment and Diversity Specialist at British Gas, agreed: "You need to make sure that young people are getting advice from the right people. If someone has left school, gone to university and then become a careers advisor – how can they possibly have real insight into engineering? It's about putting in place a system which puts young people in touch with those with experience."

Both the large employers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that took part in our research expressed interest in being involved with careers guidance. Kate Craig-Wood, Managing Director of the Information Technology firm Memset, which employs 11 people, said: "I am keen to promote the IT sector in my local schools and am in discussions with two local girls' schools about doing just that. I think that everyone can do their bit to promote the sector to girls. This will help ease skills shortages and make for more inclusive working environments." The new careers guidance service for young people should facilitate such interactions between employers and young people.

**Recommendation 2: The new careers guidance service for young people should act as a conduit, linking young people with employers. Many SET employers would welcome increased opportunities to meet with young people and promote their sector to non-traditional entrants.**

### **7.1.2 Careers coordinators**

The role that schools play in delivery of CEG has increased in recent years, in line with the diminished role being played by Connexions. Given this, participants raised concerns about schools' ability to deliver careers guidance in a way that challenges young people's assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.

In particular, participants raised concerns about the quality of careers coordinators. The careers coordinator is the teacher in a school who has been given overall responsibility for CEG. This role is often taken on part-time by a subject teacher. Estimates suggest that as many as 50% of careers coordinators have no qualifications in CEG and therefore will not have received training in challenging young people's assumptions about gender roles in work.<sup>48</sup>

Barry Sheerman MP, Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, said: "We need an end to the days when a subject teacher takes a few lessons off to sit in the careers library. This will never lead to young people having their assumptions about gender roles challenged."

John Hayes MP commented: "We need to professionalise the role of the careers coordinator. I advocate providing funding for a full-time careers coordinator in every school."

**Recommendation 3: The Government should provide funding for a full-time careers coordinator in every school and ensure that careers coordinators are appropriately trained. A key component of the training should be ways to challenge young people's assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.**

### 7.1.3 Form and subject teachers

Alongside the careers coordinator, form and subject teachers play a significant role in helping young people decide about their futures, both through their interactions with individual pupils and on occasions when they are required to teach the careers education element of Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE).

The role of form and subject teachers is likely to increase in future. In December 2007 the Government published *The Children's Plan*, which lays out its plans to make the UK the best place to grow up in the world. *The Children's Plan* states that all secondary school pupils should have a personal tutor whose role will include careers guidance: 'They will work with young people to identify their long-term aspirations and guide them on the best choice of subjects at age 14 and 16...[they will help young people] look to future education, training and careers choices.'<sup>49</sup>

Little has been done to ensure that form and subject teachers are equipped to deliver CEG, nor to ensure that they are challenging young people's assumptions about gender roles in the workforce. To address this, participants stressed the importance of teacher training. Baroness Thomas of Walliswood, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Women and Equality, said: "Teachers get no training on careers advice, either when they first qualify as teachers or as CPD. If we ask form tutors to help young people think about careers then we should train them. Otherwise we cannot expect teachers to have thought about whether they're passing on their own assumptions about gender roles."

Gordon Marsden MP, Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, agreed: "We must think carefully about this issue. I know that the Government has asked the Teachers Development Agency to look into training for careers guidance and I will be interested to see what they propose."

**Recommendation 4: The Government should ensure that form and subject teachers receive training in careers guidance, either as part of Initial Teacher Training or Continued Professional Development. A key component of the training should be ways to challenge young people's assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.**

### 7.1.4 Work experience

At present, work experience typically lasts two weeks and takes place at the end of Year 10. The amount of time that young people spend on work experience will increase in future under the Government's plans to introduce 'taster visits'.

Work experience could play a key role in reducing occupational segregation. An Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) survey of 566 pupils found that 80% of girls would or might be interested in a non-traditional job if they were able to try it first.<sup>50</sup> Baroness Sharp told us: "Work experience is undoubtedly important. My own daughter is an electronic engineer and only decided to become one after doing work experience in the sector."

At the moment not enough is being done to ensure that work experience results in reductions to occupational segregation. Clare Morley, Director of Education and Training at the Association of Accounting Technicians, commented: "The way that work experience is organised at the moment does nothing to challenge gender stereotypes. Schools either ask pupils to go out and find their own placement, which is hardly a recipe for innovative choices, or pupils are allocated to placements from a list."

The EOC survey examined provision of work experience in 20 schools and found that, across all the schools, there were only two boys on childcare placements but 43 girls. Of these girls, only 27 had chosen childcare whilst the rest had been allocated it. This strongly suggests that teachers allocating placements were basing their decisions on assumptions about gender roles. Indeed, the research found that only 15% of pupils received any advice or information on non-traditional placements.<sup>51</sup>

49 *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures* (DCSF, 2007), section 5.19

50 *Free to Choose: Tackling Gender Barriers to Better Jobs* (EOC, 2005), p.5

51 *Ibid*, p.5

Julie Morgan MP, Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Group for Sex Equality, said: "The Government must ensure that, as it increases the amount of time that pupils spend on work experience, gender segregation is addressed."

The recent guidelines on work experience make no mention of gender segregation.<sup>52</sup> Participants stressed that these need to be updated. Schools should be asked to advise pupils on the benefits of trying a range of different jobs, including those in non-traditional sectors.

An OECD paper on CEG in Norway suggests that, were young people there given an entitlement to two weeks work experience, it would be easier for schools to encourage them to take at least one week of work experience in a non-traditional sector.<sup>53</sup> Julie Morgan MP said: "I am interested in this idea of encouraging pupils doing work experience in a traditional sector to complement this with work experience in a non-traditional sector. Most young people in this country already do two weeks of work experience, so this is a realistic proposition."

**Recommendation 5: The Government should re-issue work experience guidelines, stating in them that schools should encourage pupils to go on placements in non-traditional sectors.**

### **7.1.5 The adult advancement and careers service**

The Government has announced that in 2010 it will introduce an adult advancement and careers service (AACCS). Participants agreed that this was a positive step. Gordon Marsden MP, Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, said: "Women may have only built up the confidence to consider entering a non-traditional sector later in life. Careers guidance for adults is vital so such women can get the information they require."

Claire Curtis-Thomas MP, Chair of the All-Party Group for Women in Science, Engineering and Design, agreed: "Women are much more likely to enter one of these sectors when they are a bit older and have some experience behind them."

David Lammy MP, interviewed when he was Minister for Skills, said: "We recognise that better quality information and guidance can help to improve the choices that young women make about their career paths. Through the development of the adult advancement and careers service and work with young women taking up apprenticeships, we are actively improving the quality and level of information available. This will include more detail about the long-term financial implications of choices – for example, that on average, careers in engineering attract far higher salaries than those in hairdressing."

However other participants said that they would like to see the Government go further. Baroness Margaret Sharp observed: "Although availability of labour market information about pay disparities across sectors will make some difference, I wonder if the new adult service needs to take a more proactive approach to challenging the development of occupational segregation."

Before the new service is rolled out nationally, the Government will publish common service standards and a workforce development strategy for the AACCS. It is vital that these include measures to ensure that advisors working for the new service challenge individuals' assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.

**Recommendation 6: The forthcoming common service standards and workforce development strategy for the new adult advancement and careers service should include measures to ensure that advisors working for the new service challenge individuals' assumptions about gender roles in the workforce.**

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<sup>52</sup> *The Work-Related Learning Guide – First Edition* (DCSF, 2008)

<sup>53</sup> *OECD Review of Careers Guidance Policies: Norway Country Note* (OECD, 2003), p.14

### 7.1.6 An all-age service

Some participants argued that careers guidance would improve if it were provided by an all-age service, catering for both young people and adults. John Hayes MP said: "I have always advocated an all-age service. When you have one service for young people and one for adults, individuals who have previously made use of the service for young people will often not know where to go for advice once they become adults. If women are missing out on advice as a result of this, then we are missing chances to challenge gendered assumptions about job roles."

It is widely argued that the best careers service in the world is that in New Zealand, and that an important reason for the service's quality is that it provides careers guidance to individuals of all ages. There are all-age services in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.<sup>54</sup>

The Government has ruled out introducing an all-age service, but the option of combining services for young people and adults should be kept under review.

**Recommendation 7: The Government should keep the option of introducing an all-age careers service under review.**

## 7.2 Changing cultural attitudes

Participants argued that societal assumptions about gender roles in the workforce are often fostered by the media, who either fail to portray women in non-traditional occupations or portray women working in these sectors unsympathetically. Annette Williams, Director of the UK Research Centre for Women in SET (UKRC), said: "Our research has shown that media portrayal of women working in SET tends to adhere to certain stereotypes, for example over-emotional or cold. When a programme does introduce a female scientist as a main protagonist, avoiding negative stereotypes, the impact on women's career decisions is profound. There was a huge increase in the number of women entering forensic science after *Silent Witness* was aired, for example."

Participants argued that, were media portrayals of women in SET to become more positive, this would dramatically alter perceptions about gender roles in the workforce. Terry Marsh, Director of Women into Science, Engineering and Construction (WISE), said: "We need to look at challenging these assumptions about gender roles where they emerge. Improving careers guidance is a great cure, but we must also look at prevention."

Caroline Waters commented: "Careers guidance is important but by the time they receive careers guidance young people will already hold many of these stereotypes about job roles. That's what we need to change. We need to target interventions at the levels at which these stereotypes emerge."

### 7.2.1 Broadcasters

Annette Williams discussed some of the ways in which television and other media should be portraying women in non-traditional sectors. "I would like more programmes showing the wide range of motivations people have for going into science. I would also like to see some indication that women who have gone into SET can find it enjoyable and fulfilling."

Dame Ruth Silver, member of the Women and Work Commission, said: "It is important that soaps and dramas show women working in non-traditional sectors, but factual programmes about women who have had success in non-traditional sectors would have a larger impact."

No major British broadcaster has made any commitment to challenging stereotypes about gender roles in the workforce. This should change.

**Recommendation 8: Broadcasters should ensure that programmes include positive portrayals of women working in science, engineering and technology.**

<sup>54</sup> *Inspiration and Aspiration*, p.45

### 7.2.2 Media campaigns

Participants in our research argued that the Government or its agencies should introduce a high profile campaign challenging gendered attitudes to careers. John Penrose MP, Secretary of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, said: "I think marketing could have a significant impact, increasing the number of women entering SET substantially."

Gordon Marsden MP observed: "An astutely targeted campaign could make a significant difference. By use of mediums such as Teachers TV, it could be aimed quite specifically at those who influence people's decisions about learning and careers."

A well-designed and high profile media campaign could substantially influence the career choices of young people and would be financially justified in the long-term given the benefits to the economy of more women entering SET.

**Recommendation 9: The Government, or government agencies, should introduce a high profile campaign challenging gendered attitudes to careers.**

## Michelle Dow, Gas Engineer

Michelle, 32, grew up in Liverpool. When she was 13, Michelle was asked to find out about job opportunities in a sector of the economy that appealed to her for a schools careers project. Michelle had a passion for cars and wrote to engineering firms across the North West, as well as to the Women's Engineering Society, asking for information. Michelle was met with nothing but encouragement and decided that engineering was the career for her.

Michelle chose appropriate GCSEs and found herself a work experience placement in a small, local engineering firm. Aged 15, she applied for five apprenticeships and received five offers, opting to join British Gas. Michelle says: "Looking back, I really was incredibly fortunate. If my parents, friends or school had questioned my interest in going into engineering, it probably wouldn't have happened. I know other girls who might consider non-traditional sectors aren't so lucky."

From the outset of her apprenticeship with British Gas, Michelle was treated well by those she worked with. "When I first walked in," she says, "my first colleagues were taken aback to have been given a female apprentice, but when it came to it everyone was superb with me."

Michelle qualified in 1996 and started work as a gas service engineer. She quickly proved adept at her job and skilled at dealing with customers. "My gender was hardly ever an issue," Michelle comments. "If it's winter and your boiler isn't working, you really don't mind who comes to fix it. Occasionally a female customer might look askance at being sent a female engineer – the attitude was, if I can't do this, why can you? With men, I could always have a bit of banter – can't you fix this yourself?"

Supported by British Gas, Michelle went on a number of courses including a Further Adult Education Teaching Certificate. In recognition of her increased skills, Michelle was promoted to Technical Help Desk Support Engineer. If any of the company's 7,000 engineers came across a problem that they could not fix, they would call the Help Desk and Michelle or a colleague would talk them through the procedure.

Michelle says: "I was the only women on the help desk but again it wasn't really a problem. Very occasionally an engineer would ask to be transferred to someone else, but they soon changed their tune when they realised I knew what I was talking about."

Meanwhile Michelle also worked as a neighbourhood engineer and became involved with an organisation called STEMNET, which

encourages young people to enter SET sectors. Michelle comments: "I think this is a tremendous organisation. They put me in touch with the right audience, girls that might be interested in engineering careers."

British Gas saw her dedication and, when they opened a new engineering academy in 2002, approached her to join the Diversity Team. She has worked in the team ever since, going into schools and communities to promote engineering amongst girls and ethnic minorities.



Michelle has introduced innovative recruiting techniques such as 'It's a Gas', a series of curriculum-based challenges now used by recruiters across the company as a means of attracting girls into engineering. A recent evaluation found that 54% of girls going through 'It's a Gas' would consider a career in the sector as a result.

Michelle argues that both Government and individuals have a role to play in challenging assumptions about gender roles in the workforce, but that a starting point would be improvements to careers guidance. "At careers events, I see teachers directing girls to the hairdressing stand. It breaks my heart to think that these girls are missing out on opportunities that they might prefer." Michelle thinks that Connexions has a mixed impact, with some very dedicated staff who put the full range of options before all young people and some staff that are not interested.

Michelle is still increasing her skills and has recently completed a CIPD course in recruitment and selection. Last year Michelle had her first child and has recently returned to work following maternity leave.

## Deborah Adshead and Jessica Zeun Information technology business women

Jessica Zeun, 30, and Deborah Adshead, 42, both from Sheffield, now run an Information Technology business. They know it can be difficult for women to break into IT.

Jess says: "I was always interested in computers and put down IT as one of my GCSE choices. It was the first year that my school had offered the GCSE and, finding the subject oversubscribed, they asked all girls who had chosen the subject to opt for a different course so there'd be places for the boys. I insisted though and took the subject."

The school only offered half an A-level in IT, which Jess took alongside a half A-level in Music and full A-levels in English and General Studies. She left to study English at university, feeling this was the right choice for her as the only university subject for which she had a full A-level. Not liking the course, though, Jess gave it up and got an administration job at a shopping centre. After a break from education Jess went back to university for a second time to study IT, paying her way through a part-time degree at Sheffield Hallam University.



Deborah came to the same course from a different background, having left school at 15 with no qualifications. She moved through a series of jobs with limited prospects.

After some years Deborah realised that she could make more of herself and took her first step back into education, enrolling for a secretarial course at Stannington College. Deborah says: "At the time, going to secretarial college felt like an aspirational step. It was a big improvement on what I was doing. Of course, I was taking a traditionally female route, but I would not have got where I am today had I not begun with some sort of training."

Deborah took a series of secretarial jobs after completing her course, all with IT companies, sparking an interest in computing. "At all the companies I worked at," she says, "it was noticeable that there were mainly men in technical roles. But I was always keen on this side of things and managed to get involved in one way or another."

In 1997, after having her first child, Deborah enrolled at Sheffield Hallam University, initially as a part-time student but moving to full-time status as her child grew. Deborah said: "I loved the course, but was the only mature female student in my group which could leave you feeling out on a limb."

Both Jess and Deborah graduated in 2002, having become friends. They found IT jobs in the local area. Both were glad to be working in IT, though sometimes found their gender to be an issue. Jess describes one experience: "I was working on the help desk, helping clients with computer issues. I wanted to move on and although I had a very supportive manager, the director in charge of our department tried to insist I stay on the help desk. His attitude was typical, I thought – put women in customer facing roles."

Jess and Deborah eventually decided to set up their own IT company. JD Approach was established in 2005 and offers a range of services including web design and training. It has gone from strength to strength.

Both Jess and Deborah are keen to help women entering IT, and they have successfully bid for funding to set up a networking group for female students at Sheffield Hallam. Jess comments: "There's a long way to go. We recently advertised for a technical job, and received fifty applications – only one from a woman. We do a lot of work in local schools promoting IT as a career for girls. Our dream would be to learn in future years that our efforts convinced one of the girls to enter the sector."

## British Telecommunications Group (BT)

BT is the dominant fixed line telecommunications and broadband Internet provider in the United Kingdom and a FTSE 100 company. Communications has traditionally been a male-dominated sector but BT has managed to increase the proportion of its employees that are female from less than 15% in the 1990s to 23% today.

Caroline Waters, BT's Director of People and Policy, explains the strategies that BT has put in place. "We want to make sure that our recruitment drives reach as many people as possible," she says, "including women, particularly disadvantaged women, who would not normally think of themselves as potential BT employees." To achieve this BT has developed a network of charities and community groups that work with hard-to-reach groups. BT advertises job opportunities through these groups.

In addition, each year new apprentices at the company are sent out to schools, colleges and recruitment fairs to tell other young people about their experiences. "We find that a 15 or 16 year old is much more likely to listen to a 16 or 17 year old than they are anyone else," Caroline Waters says. "So if we send a female apprentice into a school and other girls see what she is doing and how she is enjoying it, then that really makes a difference." The number of female apprentices at BT has risen from 12% in 2004 to 16% in 2008.

**"We make it clear to any recruiters that BT does not consider all-male shortlists acceptable"**

BT thinks carefully about which recruitment fairs to target. Caroline explains: "Some of our new apprentices volunteered to attend the Mela Festival in Birmingham as a means of engaging young Asian women. It's not just a case of saying, look, we have these great jobs. You have to understand the community you're approaching. For example, we learnt that when looking to recruit young Asian women, it's important to speak with their parents. The parents need to see that, if their daughters work for BT, they will be respected and will have the opportunity to develop good career options."

BT has also introduced 'Bring Your Daughters to Work Day' to increase girls' exposure to work in non-traditional sectors. Many girls who first experienced non-traditional work in this way have later gone on to join BT as employees.

When BT uses recruitment companies it makes sure that inclusion issues remain to the fore. "We make it clear to any recruiters that BT does not consider all-male shortlists acceptable," Caroline comments. "Stipulations on diversity are included in contracts, measured against performance metrics, so recruiters know that if they fail to provide diverse applicants they risk losing our business."

BT has also focused particular attention on those parts of the workforce in which women are especially under-represented. This includes amongst customer service engineers at Openreach, BT's engineering business. There have been two recruitment drives for Openreach engineers over the past three years and each has been designed with a view to attracting female applicants.

This means more than just placing job advertisements in places where women are likely to see them, as Caroline explains: "Our research showed that, if you put an advertisement for an engineering post in a women's magazine, it will either not register with readers or they'll pass the advertisement over to their husband or boyfriend to look at."

Instead BT found that women are more likely to consider a career in engineering after hearing positive stories about female engineers. Caroline explains the approach they adopted: "We placed articles in the media about a whole range of female engineers, of all ages, in which the women told their own stories. It was important to think where to put these stories to reach women. So, for example, we found out that Climbing Magazine has a 60% female readership. Women who like out-door pursuits may very well be interested in our engineering opportunities so we decided to place job advertisements in this magazine."

As well as thinking creatively about how to attract female applicants, BT works hard to ensure that when women have joined the company they are able to develop careers. BT is well-known for its training programmes but is also becoming well-known for its policies on flexible working. Almost 80% of BT's workforce now works flexibly, on one of the 30 or so flexible working arrangements that the company offers.

This and other measures are helping to ensure that women are able to move up through the company. 23% of BT's workforce is female and, over the past year, 23 of the one hundred most senior appointments in the company went to women.

## Employer best practice: occupational segregation

There are a range of measures that employers can take to reduce occupational segregation, as demonstrated by BT. Employers can:

- Recruit from places and media likely to reach target groups of women.
- Engage with schools, making sure that female pupils can see that there are opportunities for them in non-traditional sectors.
- Ensure that the approach taken to recruiting considers ways to make the organisation attractive to women, for example through positive case studies about existing female employees.
- Include stipulations in recruitment agencies' contracts that a significant proportion of the applicants they identify must be women.
- Ensure that work culture is conducive to female employees staying with the organisation, for example by making available a wide range of flexible working options.

# Work-Life balance

## 8. Work-Life balance

Women often take time out of the workforce to look after children or an adult in need of care. In doing so, they make a valuable contribution to families, communities and society. However, time away from the workforce limits the capacity for on-the-job learning and the acquisition of job-related skills.

In her interview for this research, Eleanor Laing MP, Conservative Shadow Minister for Justice, observed: "Although women in their late teens and early to mid twenties tend to have similar work patterns as men, once they have children and family responsibilities women tend not to devote so much time to work."

Participants agreed that there is insufficient support for individuals who want to combine parenting or caring commitments with ongoing work and skills development. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of ensuring that legislation challenges rather than reflects societal assumptions that women should be more involved in parenting and caring than men. Anne Milton MP, Conservative Shadow Minister for Health, said: "The assumption that the man goes to work and the woman stays at home needs to change. Many men and women with children now share childcare and work responsibilities and do not necessarily fall into stereotypical roles as they would have done in the past."

Barbara Follett MP, interviewed when she was Under-Secretary of State at the Equalities Office, also stressed the importance of supporting individuals trying to balance work and family life: "The Government believes that families are the framework of our lives and central to society and we have introduced a number of practical measures to help families balance the responsibilities of work and family life. We are committed to giving women, and men, fair chances in the workforce."

### 8.1. Maternity and paternity leave

Participants expressed concern that extensions to maternity leave over the past decade, without corresponding increases in paternity leave, have resulted in women taking more time out of the workforce than men. Some employers recruit or promote men ahead of women because women are likely to take more time off after having children. This restricts opportunities for women to develop their skills and progress in their careers.

John Penrose MP, Secretary of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, said: "If you have a system that allows far more maternity leave than paternity leave, you are creating a situation where employers won't want to employ women, even though that's illegal."

Reducing the disparity between the leave available to new fathers and mothers would create a level playing field for men's and women's engagement in the workforce. Tony Moloney, UK Learning & Development Manager at the National Grid, said: "There needs to be equal access so that a father staying at home begins to be seen more as the norm."

At present, mothers are entitled to 39 weeks paid maternity leave, whilst fathers are entitled to up to two weeks paid paternity leave. The Government is committed to introducing new measures that will make leave more flexible. Under the new measures, mothers will be able to take up to 52 weeks paid maternity leave. However, after the first 26 weeks of leave, parents will be able to transfer the remaining 26 weeks of leave to the father.<sup>55</sup>

Participants welcomed the forthcoming reforms, recognising them as an effort by the Government to reduce disparity in the length of leave taken by new mothers and new fathers. Baroness Margaret Sharp, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Innovation, Universities and Skills in the House of Lords, observed: "Allowing parents to switch leave from the mother to the father will certainly be an improvement on the existing situation, in which mothers can take a long period off work and fathers very little."

However some argued for more radical change. Anne Madden, Head of Education, Skills and Employability Policy at the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), told us: “In countries which have introduced transferable leave schemes, there has not been a great increase in the amount of leave taken by men. Given the choice, parents tend to choose for mothers to take time off.” The countries which have introduced long periods of transferable parental leave have not seen much increase in take-up of paternity leave (Group A countries on Figure 1, overleaf).

As indicated in Figure 1, there are transferable leave schemes in Germany, Italy and Austria and the proportion of fathers who take leave in these countries is 9%, 7% and 2% respectively. When transferable parental leave was first introduced in Finland, only 2-3% of fathers chose to take time off. In an effort to change this, the law was further amended so that parents get a bonus two weeks of leave if some of their parental leave allowance is taken up by the father. This has resulted in the proportion of fathers taking parental leave rising to 10%, an improvement but still considerably below the proportion of women taking leave.<sup>56</sup> The Finnish Minister for Labour has now proposed moving to a system incorporating a degree of non-transferable parental leave.<sup>57</sup>

A system which incorporates a degree of non-transferable parental leave is used in Iceland, Norway and Sweden amongst others (see Group B countries on Figure 1 overleaf). In these countries, a portion of the parental leave allowance is non-transferable; that is, it is ring-fenced for either the mother or father. When a portion of a father’s allocation cannot be transferred to the mother, the father must take time off himself or that portion of the leave allocation is lost. Providing the financial remuneration for those on parental leave is generous, this system results in many more fathers taking time off work: 84% in Iceland, 89% in Norway and 90% in Sweden.

Participants in our research argued that a similar system ought to be introduced in the United Kingdom. The Government’s planned changes to the system of maternity and paternity leave ought to be amended to include an additional four weeks of non-transferable paid leave for fathers.

**Recommendation 10: The Government’s planned changes to the system of maternity and paternity leave ought to be amended to include an additional four weeks of non-transferable paid leave for fathers.**

Participants also discussed the importance of helping women to return to work following maternity leave. Reducing the barriers faced by women who wish to return to work after maternity leave would ensure that their skills are utilised.

The level of contact between employees on maternity leave and their employer was identified as a key factor in facilitating returning to work. Julie Morgan MP, Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Group for Sex Equality, said: “I feel quite strongly that there’s much that could be done during the leave period to make it easier for women to remain involved. There is some fairly simple best practice that enables women to at least keep in touch with what’s happening in their workplace. I’ve observed women who have been on maternity leave and they’ve had absolutely no contact at all with the workplace. This means when they do go back it is very difficult, causing a huge amount of dread.”

Inspector Danielle Corfield from West Midlands Police also emphasised the importance of helping women return to work: “Any increase in maternity and paternity leave will ensure more choice for parents and carers. This is a positive move provided that real support can be offered to staff during their leave and on return to the workplace.”

Participants made a number of suggestions for improving the way in which organisations keep in contact with employees on maternity leave. Julie Morgan MP said: “Some employers are wary about contacting employees on leave as they are unsure what is legally permissible. The Government should do more to help employers understand what they are allowed to do.”

56 J. Lammi-Taskula, *Doing Fatherhood: Understanding the Gendered Use of Parental Leave in Finland* (Fathering, 2008)

57 ‘Finland proposes non-transferable parental leave’ (Ice News, 16 March 2008)

## Figure One: Parental leave in Europe

	Country (year data refers to)	Paid paternity leave*	Parental leave**			
			Allocation	Additional bonus allocation if a portion of transferable leave is taken by the father	Earnings replacement	Take-up
United Kingdom	Current	2 weeks	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Following reform	2 weeks	12 months total; 6 months for the mother, 6 months transferable between parents	N/A	90% of pay for 6 weeks then flat rate	N/A
Group A countries	Germany (2007)	None	12 months, transferable between parents	2 months	67% of pay	9%
	Italy (2006)	None	10 months, transferable between parents	1 month	30% of pay	7%
	Austria (2006)	None	18 months, transferable between parents	6 months	Flat rate (low benefits)	2%
Group B countries	Finland (2005)	3 weeks	26 weeks, transferable between parents	2 weeks	43-82% of pay	10%
	Iceland (2005)	None	9 months total; 3 months for the mother, 3 months for the father, 3 months transferable	N/A	80% of pay	84%
	Norway (2006)	None	54 weeks total; 9 weeks for the mother, 6 weeks for the father, 39 weeks transferable	N/A	Flat rate (minimum wage)	89%
	Sweden (2006)	2 weeks	68 weeks; 8 weeks for the mother, 8 for the father, 52 weeks transferable	N/A	80% of pay	90%
	Luxembourg (2006)	2 days	12 months total; 6 months for the mother, 6 months for the father	N/A	Flat rate (minimum wage)	17%
	Belgium (2006)	10 days	24 weeks total; 12 weeks for the father and 12 weeks for the mother	N/A	Flat rate (low benefits)	<7%

\* Paternity leave here refers to fathers' right to a short period of leave immediately after the birth of the child

\*\* Parental leave here refers to parents' rights to longer periods of leave in the months and years following childbirth  
Source: K. Marshall, *Fathers' use of paid parental leave* (Statistics Canada, 2008)

Other participants said that employers could make better use of technology. Clare Wildfire, a Director at Fulcrum Consulting, said: “With emails and other forms of communication it should not be difficult to keep in contact with mothers on leave.” In addition a number of participants said that employers are not yet taking advantage of the introduction of ‘Keep in Touch Days’, whereby mothers on leave can come into work for ten days during the period of their leave.

**Recommendation 11: The Government should help employers to understand the laws concerning contacting women on maternity leave and disseminate information on how organisations can use Information Technology and ‘Keep in Touch Days’ to keep new mothers informed of developments at work.**

## 8.2 Childcare

Participants welcomed extensions to financial help towards the costs of childcare. Claire Curtis-Thomas MP, Chair of the All-Party Group for Women in Science, Engineering and Design, said: “There’s been a sea change here; this Government has done a fantastic amount.” Barry Sheerman MP, Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, said: “This Government has done a great deal to help parents with children under five.”

It is extremely welcome that the Government has started helping parents pay for childcare. This has given many women the option to carry on in work, developing their skills. However, the complexity of the existing financial mechanisms for provision of financial help with childcare means that some parents are not receiving the help that they might need. Employees whose employer has signed up for the Childcare Voucher scheme can agree to convert part of their salary into vouchers, which are not taxed and can be used in place of payment for childcare. However, many parents are unaware of the scheme and only one in fifty of those eligible for it has signed up.<sup>58</sup>

Childcare Tax Credits were introduced with a view to encouraging lone mothers back into work. Yet in 2005 only 223,800 out of over one million eligible single parents claimed their Childcare Tax Credit.<sup>59</sup>

Participants argued that existing help with childcare costs – which is spread across Sure Start, the Early Years Education Entitlement, Childcare Tax Credit and Childcare Vouchers – should be replaced by a simple childcare voucher system available to all parents with children under five. Parents would then be able to use the vouchers in place of payment across a range of types of childcare. A simpler system would require less Government bureaucracy to manage.

The Swedish Government has recently announced its intention to introduce a voucher system, under which parents will be able to spend their allocation of money on the type of childcare which best fits with their lives and what they feel is right for their child.<sup>60</sup>

**Recommendation 12: The Government should introduce a childcare voucher scheme, available to all parents of children under five, whereby vouchers can be used in place of payment across a range of types of childcare. The voucher scheme should replace existing funding mechanisms providing help with childcare costs.**

Participants also expressed concern that mothers can find it difficult to organise childcare at the times when they are required to work. This acts as a barrier to those women who need to balance work and family commitments.

Participants suggested that this problem could be addressed by ensuring the availability of a wide range of childcare options, including childminding. There has been an 11.5% drop in the number of registered childminders since 2004.<sup>61</sup> Participants argued that the Government must explore ways of reversing this downward trend, for example through financial incentives or campaigns promoting childminding as a career.

58 ‘Parents “can’t be bothered” to claim childcare savings’ (Childcare Choice website, 1 May 2007)

59 C. Skinner, *How can Childcare Help to End Child Poverty?* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006)

60 *Fact sheet: Investment in Pre-school and a Childcare Voucher System* (Stockholm Ministry of Education and Research, 2008)

61 ‘Decline in number of childminders’ (BBC website, 20 August 2008)

**Recommendation 13: The Government should explore ways of reversing the downward trend in the number of registered childminders.**

### 8.3 Carers

The definition of a carer is someone who provides unpaid care by looking after an ill, frail or disabled family member, friend or partner. There are around six million carers in the UK, 57% of them women.<sup>62</sup> Research shows that many carers would like to combine caring with work but are not able to do so. In a recent study, 40% of full-time carers said that they would like to be in paid work but needed better support and services to achieve this.<sup>63</sup>

The number of carers will increase dramatically over the next generation because of the ageing population and an associated rise in the number of individuals with health problems such as dementia, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. Carers UK estimates that by 2037 the number of carers will increase by 3 million.<sup>64</sup>

Clare Morley, Director of Education and Training at the Association of Accounting Technicians, said: "The number of carers is increasing year on year and we must make sure that we take this into account. It's not just childcare that results in women taking time out of work."

Eleanor Laing MP, Conservative Shadow Minister for Justice, comments: "There is sometimes a tendency to frame the debate on work-life balance entirely around those looking after children. This is a mistake and increasingly so as the population ages and more people are looking after elderly relatives."

The main sources of Government-assisted aid to carers are Income Support (IS) and the Carer's Allowance. In a recent Green Paper the Government outlined its long term plans to simplify the benefit system, abolishing IS and moving carers onto Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). Describing the reasoning behind this change, the Government notes that many carers would like to be more involved in work.<sup>65</sup>

However, these proposed changes caused strong concern among carers, who argued that they fail to recognise the complexity and range of caring situations. They suggested that transferring those currently receiving Income Support onto JSA would demonstrate a failure to distinguish between those carers that can return to work and those whose extensive caring responsibilities make this impossible.<sup>66</sup>

Subsequently, the Government has said it will not go ahead with any changes to carers' benefits until it has carried out further investigations into the impact that they will cause.<sup>67</sup> Participants in our research welcomed this latest announcement. However, they stressed that, given the inadequacies of the existing system, the Government should publish and adhere to a firm timetable outlining the next steps that it will take towards reforming carers' benefits.

**Recommendation 14: The Government should publish and adhere to a firm timetable outlining the next steps that it will take towards reforming carers' benefits.**

### 8.4 The long hours culture

The UK workforce has a culture of working long hours, with over 3 million employees defined as 'long hour workers'.<sup>68</sup> Liz Smith, Director of unionlearn, stressed that: "The long hour culture makes it very difficult for women looking to combine work with caring responsibilities."

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62 *Valuing and Supporting Carers* (DWP Select Committee, 2008), p.15

63 *Ibid*, p.12 and p.16

64 *Ibid*, p.70

65 *No One Written Off: Reforming Welfare to Reward Responsibility* (DWP, 2008)

66 See petition to the Prime Minister: <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/caringiswork/?showall=1>

67 *Raising Expectations and Increasing Support: Reforming Welfare for the Future* (December, 2008), p.10

68 *The Return of the Long Hours Culture* (TUC, 2008), p.3

Terry Marsh, Director of WISE, said: “Women can find that employers and fellow employees expect them to work long hours and this does not leave them time to manage caring responsibilities. As a result many women are deterred from engaging in the workforce and their opportunities to develop skills at work and advance their careers are curtailed.”

Following the introduction of the Working Time Directive in 1998, long hour working fell into decline. Between 1998 and 2007 the numbers of long hour workers dropped from 3.8 million to 3.1 million. However this trend has now reversed. Between the spring of 2007 and the winter of 2008 the number of long hours workers increased by 180,000.<sup>69</sup>

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimate that, in the UK, individuals in employment work on average 1,655 hours per year. Although this is less than many developed Asian countries, it is considerably higher than most European countries. For example, in Germany the average is 1,353 hours per year and in France it is 1,457 hours per year.<sup>70</sup>

Participants argued that more should be done to challenge the UK's long hour culture. Baroness Thomas of Walliswood, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Women and Equality, said: “Reducing the hours people work is not just an equality issue, it also makes sense for businesses. If you have to come in every day and work 15 hours a day, the quality of your work goes down, not up.” Although UK workers work the longest hours in the EU-15, UK labour productivity is only 95% of the EU-15 average.<sup>71</sup>

The Working Time Directive stipulates that employees should not work an average of more than 48 hours a week. Workers in the UK who wish to work longer hours can opt-out of the Directive, though this may be disallowed in future following a recent vote by the European Parliament.<sup>72</sup>

Whilst debate about the future of the opt-out clause is ongoing, more could be done to ensure that the existing regulations are followed. Responsibility for enforcing the Working Time Directive is divided between the Health and Safety Executive, Local Authority Environmental Health departments and various specialist agencies for the transport sector.

However, the Health and Safety Executive and Local Authority Environmental Health departments have been asked by the Government not to make enforcement of the Working Time Directive a priority. As a result, these agencies tend to only investigate working hours on occasions when they receive a complaint, and sometimes not even then.<sup>73</sup> This limits the extent to which the Working Time Directive results in any change to the long hours culture.

**Recommendation 15: The Government should ask the Health and Safety Executive and Local Authority Environmental Health departments to proactively enforce the Working Time Directive.**

## 8.5 Flexible working

A key way of helping individuals to balance work with parenting or caring commitments is to ensure the availability of a wide range of working options, for example part-time work, flexitime, job sharing, additional holiday purchase, unpaid leave and home-working. The more options that are available, the more women will be able to work alongside looking after children or adults in need of care.

Gareth Robinson, Chief Executive of WOW Property, told us: “We need to get away from this idea that the only choice women have is between staying at home with their children all of the time or working full-time. Flexible working creates a third option which is good for businesses and families.”

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p.3

<sup>70</sup> OECD *Employment Outlook* (OECD, 2008), p.354

<sup>71</sup> See [http://www.tuc.org.uk/work\\_life/index.cfm?mins=474&minors=474](http://www.tuc.org.uk/work_life/index.cfm?mins=474&minors=474)

<sup>72</sup> “Working Time Directive: No exceptions to the 48-hours maximum working week and opt-out scrapped after three years say MEPs” (European Parliament Press release, 17 December 2008)

<sup>73</sup> *The Return of the Long Hours Culture* (TUC, 2008), pp.2-3; *Ending the Opt-outs from the 48 Hour Week* (TUC, 2008), p.5

There is a body of evidence showing that flexible working benefits employers as well as their employees.<sup>74</sup> Many FTSE 100 companies allow a high proportion of their employees to work flexibly, irrespective of whether they have parenting or caring commitments. These companies have found that this has a positive impact on business. Organisations that allow a high proportion of employees to work flexibly are seen as better places to work, so attract more job applicants, many more from women, and recruit better workers as a result. Staff retention rates also show marked improvements, particularly the retention of female employees. In addition, organisations find that performance improves; employees make fewer mistakes when allowed to work at times convenient for them.

Increasingly, flexible working is becoming entrenched in the UK's working culture. 14 million workers in the UK currently work flexibly. Nonetheless, there remains considerable unmet demand for access to flexible working. For example, 29% of employees would like to have the opportunity to move onto flexitime, 27% would like the option of moving onto a compressed working week and 21% would like to have the opportunity to work from home on a regular basis.<sup>75</sup>

A substantial proportion of employers have still not considered ways to make their working practices more flexible. Many of these are medium-sized businesses. Caroline Waters from BT comments: "Most forward thinking, large organisations now offer flexible working. Many small organisations do as well, though they might not recognise the term. Small business owners know their employees personally and make allowances for their individual needs – flexible working grows organically. The problem often arises in medium businesses, in which the business owner does not know all the employees but nor is the organisation large enough to afford a professional human resources team that can implement flexible working."

The Government has introduced legislation to encourage flexible working. Parents of children under six and those caring for adults have a statutory right to request flexible working, with their employer obliged to accept such a request unless they can make a business case for rejecting it. The statutory right to request flexible working will be extended to include parents of children aged up to sixteen from April 2009.<sup>76</sup>

Participants in our research, including those from all political parties, welcomed the introduction of the statutory right to request flexible working, pointing to the huge difference it is making to many women trying to balance work and home life. Minister Stephen Timms MP said: "My sense is that the right to request achieves a great deal but in a very light touch way in terms of impact on employers."

Eleanor Laing MP, Conservative Shadow Minister for Justice, observed: "I am very much in favour of flexible working. When you talk to employers that have introduced flexible working, and many of the large and most successful companies have done so, they will very often say that it has proved good for business." Lorely Burt MP, Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, said: "I had long campaigned for a right to request flexible working, so was very pleased when the Government brought this in."

The extension of the statutory right to request flexible working to parents of children aged up to sixteen was also popular, both amongst parliamentarians and non-parliamentarians. For example Inspector Danielle Corfield of West Midlands Police said: "This presents a real opportunity for staff. Some people believe that they need to be more available for children during their teenage years with the pressures of examinations etc. This change increases the options available to parents."

However, a number of participants argued that changes should go further and that the statutory right to request flexible working should be extended to cover all employees. Julie Morgan MP, Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Group for Sex Equality, said: "Extending the right to request to all employees would help create a culture in which flexibility is the norm, thereby reducing the stigma around requesting flexible working. If it were available to all, the right to request would be less likely to fuel resentment between colleagues. And of course it wouldn't adversely affect companies' bottom lines, because they could reject all requests which would have a negative impact on business."

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74 For example *Flexible Working: Impact and Implantation, an Employer Survey* (CIPD, 2005)

75 *The Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey: Main Findings* (DTI, 2007)

76 The Queen's speech, 3 December 2008

In addition, participants argued that employees should be eligible for the statutory right to request flexible working immediately upon joining a new organisation, not only after six months in its employment as at present. Caroline Waters argued: "This qualifying period should be removed; as it is only a right to request, altering the law would not have a negative impact on business and the rules at present discriminate against women looking to return to work. If a woman wants to return to work after a period off, quite likely she can't possibly hold out for six months before requesting flexible working."

A considerable number of countries are more progressive on flexible working than the UK. Germany, Denmark, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Poland all have legislation on flexible working which in various ways applies to all employees.

The most radical legislation is found in Germany and the Netherlands, where all employees have a right to request part-time work. German companies that have accepted requests to work part-time have found that, far from incurring costs as a result, the change has resulted in the company making savings.<sup>77</sup>

**Recommendation 16: The Government should extend the statutory right to request flexible working to all employees and remove the stipulation that individuals must have been with their employer for six months to be eligible to make a statutory request.**

Whilst many employed women benefit greatly from the right to request flexible working, no policies have been put in place to help women looking to re-enter work who would benefit from flexible working. Many job advertisements state that work hours are 9am to 5pm, five days a week. This is impractical for many women with caring commitments.

Janette Savage, a business consultant at BT, comments: "BT has very generous flexible working arrangements and I was fortunate to be able to adapt my work practices after having children. Many women who leave the IT sector after having children are not nearly so fortunate. Jobs advertisements tend to be for full-time, permanent roles or full-time contracts for a limited period of time. Although many employers are favourable to part-time working, in my experience, this is generally for those employed initially on a full-time basis."

When women looking to return to work do find jobs offering flexible working, it is often only for low-skilled positions. Government figures show that over 50% of women in part-time positions are working below their skill level.<sup>78</sup>

Anne Madden, Head of Education, Skills and Employability Policy at the EHRC, told us: "I think that there is an issue of skills utilisation. If a skilled woman looking to return to work can't find employers willing to let her work flexibly, she'll end up doing less difficult work that does not make use of her skills."

In order to mediate against this, once recommendation 16 has been introduced, further legislation should be passed making it illegal for employers that are recruiting new employees to specify required working hours beyond any requirements that the organisation can make a business case for insisting upon. In effect this would embed the right to request flexible working within the recruitment process.

**Recommendation 17: The Government should make it illegal for employers that are recruiting new employees to specify required working hours beyond those for which the employer can make a clear business case. The employer and potential employee would then be able to negotiate a working arrangement that benefits both parties.**

<sup>77</sup> A. Hegewisch, *Employers and European Flexible Working Rights: When the Floodgates were Opened* (UC Hastings College of the Law, 2005)

<sup>78</sup> See <http://nds.coi.gov.uk/content/detail.asp?NewsAreaID=2&ReleaseID=260379>

## Janette Savage, Business Consultant

Janette Savage, 39, always knew she wanted to work in Information Technology and after finishing her A-levels went on to study for a degree in Business Computing at Huddersfield University.

Completing her degree in 1991, Janette's first job was for British Steel, working in their IT department. She continued to develop her skills, taking an MBA in Business and Administration. British Steel was supportive, funding the course and giving her Fridays off to study.

Janette left British Steel when they started outsourcing IT and joined the FI Group, since re-branded as Xansa, one of the companies that pioneered home-working. Unusually for an IT company, the FI Group employed as many women as men. Janette describes her role: "I went out to companies, assessed their IT needs, and set up appropriate systems."

Janette stayed at the FI Group until 2003 when, wanting to return to her home town, Middlesbrough, she joined BT. Janette's role at BT is similar to that in her previous job, helping clients set up information systems. Janette has developed expertise in helping organisations set up home-working and other facilities for employees to work away from the office.

**"It doesn't really matter to my colleagues whether I'm in our Newcastle office or at home – I am able to participate in calls and meetings regardless."**

Janette describes her work, saying: "Recently I have been helping South Tyneside Council so their employees can work from home. It's interesting – at the moment, their field workers need to go back to the office to do their paperwork. We are looking at ways they can do this remotely."

Over the last few years Janette has herself been the beneficiary of flexible working arrangements, having become a mother in 2004. She says: "BT has fabulous flexible working options open to men and women. I have been able to return to work after maternity leave on a part-time basis and am now regularly working

from home. My work involves people located across the country so I make use of conference calls and web-based meetings. It doesn't really matter to my colleagues whether I'm in our Newcastle office or at home – I am able to participate in calls and meetings regardless of my location. I feel I have a good balance of time spent at work and time spent with my children and they have benefited from mixing with other children at nursery."



Janette feels that she has been fortunate, however, and says that women who leave employment after having children often face great difficulties. "I have friends who are now working in other occupations because they have not been able to find part-time jobs in their field of expertise. This is a massive waste of skills they have spent years building up."

Janette thinks that, whilst employers are increasingly open to flexible working, women are reluctant to discuss flexibility at interviews, fearing to do so will deter the potential employer. She says: "I have been lucky, as are others who work for companies like BT. What I would like to see is flexible working made even more available, particularly for women looking to get back into work."

## Tracey Bee, Crew Trainer

Tracey Bee, 34, left school at 16 with six GCSEs but none above Grade D. "I always had good academic ability," she says, "but family breakdown in the year leading up to my GCSEs made me rebellious and I flunked the exams."

Tracey's first job was in a chip processing factory. She comments: "it was all very menial but with my low grades it really was all I was qualified for." For a period she did move on to work as a machinist making lingerie, but she returned to the chip processing factory because, despite the simple nature of the work, pay was generous.

In 2000 Tracey gave birth to her first child and immediately ran into problems, as she explains: "After a few months I realised it just wasn't do-able. I had to get up at 4.30am to get to work and, with the child waking up through the night, everything was just leaving me exhausted."

As a result Tracey returned to her job as a machinist, where she could work a morning shift, from 7.30am to 1.30pm. This was much more manageable. "I didn't have to get up in the small hours," Tracey comments, "and my mum could look after the baby in the morning so it worked out very well."

Tracey went on to have three more children, a son and then twins, one of whom is autistic. Whilst she was on maternity leave with the twins, in 2004, the company where she worked as a machinist went out of business and Tracey found herself unemployed.

Tracey explains what happened next. "After a few more months at home I started thinking about getting back into work. We had my husband's wage but, with four children, I needed to bring in money as well. I was under no illusions that it might prove very difficult to find work which I could fit around my children."

However, when Tracey started working for McDonalds in early 2005, she found them very accommodating. Tracey thought that it would be convenient to work shifts on Saturday and Sunday mornings, times when her husband would be at home. McDonalds allowed her to work at these times.

As it turned out, the arrangement proved difficult. "It was just too tiring, two morning shifts in a row," Tracey explains. "So I went to the management intending to hand in my notice." Instead, McDonalds suggested that she tried working a different set of shifts. Tracey agreed and, ever since, has worked shifts according to her changing family needs.

Currently Tracey works on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday evenings. She says: "This works out very well. I strongly believe there should be someone there to look after the kids in the day and to take them to school. I'm there in the day, when my husband works, whilst I put in some shifts in the evenings when he is at home. As I don't work consecutive days it's not too tiring."

**"It's productive to be working at home in the evenings – much better than just watching repeats."**

Tracey is very grateful to her employer. "I have never worked for a company that is so willing to work around you," she says. "That kind of thing makes staff in my restaurant very loyal and we help out the company when we can. Occasionally they call me to work extra shifts and I always do so when possible."

Whilst at McDonalds Tracey has started gaining the qualifications that she missed out on in school. "In 2007 I spotted an advertisement on the staff website," she says. "McDonalds would pay for staff to do Level 2 courses in English and Maths. I started on these courses, working over the internet. I really enjoy them. It's productive to be working at home in the evenings – much better than just watching repeats."

Tracey has now passed her exams. She says: "It was over an hour's drive to the test centre and, with the children, it wasn't possible to organise the period away. Fortunately McDonalds helped, arranging for an assessor to come up from London to the restaurant in Grantham."

Tracey now works as a Crew Trainer, teaching other employees the skills required to work at McDonalds. Meanwhile she plans to continue developing her own skills and, as her children start school, increase the number of shifts she works. Tracey says: "I am grateful that I have been able to combine my family life, looking after four children including one that is autistic, with work. It's added massively to my quality of life and given me the confidence and qualifications to go on working in the future."

## KPMG

KPMG is one of the foremost professional services companies operating in the United Kingdom, with 11,500 employees. The company recognised that women were often finding it hard to develop their careers: 45% of its entry-level graduates are women whilst only 13% of partners are women. KPMG has taken a range of measures to increase the number of women able to develop their skills and careers.

Sarah Bond, Diversity and Inclusion Director at KPMG, says: "It makes good business sense to focus on helping women develop their careers. We invest a lot of money on training people and it's not in our interests for this training to stop, or to lose people completely, because they can't balance work and family life. When we have trained someone to a certain level we want them to go on developing their skills."

The company noted that, whilst many women were progressing to middle management roles, fewer progressed up from there. Very often, the reason for this was that women were starting families at about the time they reached middle management level and were then finding it difficult to juggle their career and home life. Efforts to help women progress focused on this problem.

### "At KPMG family is not a barrier to continued skills and career development"

As part of the 'My Family Matters' programme, new parents can attend seminars on parenting skills. There are also regular newsletters for those on maternity leave and personal communications with mothers before, during and after their leave. 90% of new mothers return to work following maternity leave.

Help does not end at that point. KPMG is introducing emergency childcare and network groups for parents to discuss common issues they are facing and approaches to overcome them.

All employees are allowed to request to work flexibly. Employees who wish to work flexibly are required to provide a written submission, explaining how they anticipate that their new working arrangements will operate. This is then scrutinised by their line manager. 98% of requests are accepted.

Types of flexibility available include part-time work, job sharing, home-working and annualised days (whereby individuals are contracted to work a certain number of days a year, with flexibility about when they choose to work). Home-working has proven to be one of the most popular flexible working choices for both women and men. KPMG provides a number of different remote access systems for staff, and 4,500 of their staff have BlackBerrys. Under a new Digital HotDesk facility, staff can divert calls coming to their office number and pick them up on their mobile or home phones.

Sarah Bond observes that it is important to promote a culture in which flexible working arrangements are accepted. Leadership is crucial here. "One of our Partners has just moved onto annualised days," she says, "which sets a terrific example for others to follow."

KPMG has taken steps to make sure that those who work flexibly are not unfairly passed over for promotion. Sarah explains: "When promoting, we look at what people have achieved, not how many hours they have been in the office. We assess people on outcomes. There are a number of examples of women working part-time who have still achieved promotion. At KPMG family is not a barrier to continued skills and career development."

## West Midlands Police

West Midlands Police employs 14,248 people, 30% of them female. This is the highest proportion of female employees in a UK police force. West Midlands Police has adopted a range of approaches to ensure that staff can balance parenting and caring with ongoing career and skills development.

Flexible working is one key element of this. Over 40% of staff work flexibly, typically part-time or through job shares. West Midlands Police is always looking to increase the range of flexible working options available to staff. They are currently setting up secure IT systems which staff can access from home. Some officers work from home already, but it is hoped that more will be able to do so in future after new systems are rolled out.

The Force has recognised that offering as many flexible working arrangements as possible is, on its own, insufficient because some women need help to work out the right option for them. It has therefore introduced two women-only training programmes which encourage staff to think creatively about work-life balance issues. Over 1,000 female staff attended these programmes in 2008. Inspector Danielle Corfield comments: "Staff are encouraged to find their own personal balance with caring responsibilities – one size does not fit all."

West Midlands Police has always put a strong emphasis on developing the skills of its staff. Learning and development centres provide bespoke resources and training for all staff throughout their career, further supported at local levels by dedicated training departments. Considerable efforts have been made to ensure that training is available to all officers, whatever their circumstances and the demands of their personal lives. For example, online learning is recognised as a valid way of gaining new skills.

An indicator of West Midlands Police's success in helping women balance work and home life is the number of women who have been able to go on developing their career alongside taking care of their family commitments. Many women have reached senior levels. The Deputy Chief Executive and Assistant Chief Constable, both female, are part of the senior command team. In addition there are three female Chief Superintendents and a number of female Superintendents and Chief Inspectors. Some of

**"Staff are encouraged to find their own personal balance with caring responsibilities – one size does not fit all"**

these work part-time or flexible hours, setting a positive example for more junior staff.

Women are particularly under-represented in the Operations Department, which covers Firearms, Dog Units and Air Operations. West Midlands Police has gone to considerable lengths to encourage women to join this department. In 2006 Chief Superintendent Phil Kay wrote to every female constable and sergeant in the force asking if they would consider moving into the Operations Department. This was a great success and resulted in a dramatic rise in women joining the department. The achievement has been widely recognised, with the Operations Department winning an Opportunity Award and an award from the British Association of Women Police.

## Fulcrum Consulting

Fulcrum Consulting is a leading international firm of consulting engineers, which provides clients with advice on developing environmentally sustainable building projects. Their work includes mechanical and electrical services engineering, community utility systems, public health engineering, inter-seasonal heat storage and vertical transportation as well as high-level environmental sustainability consultancy and masterplanning.

The company employs 99 engineers, of whom 21 are women, a much higher proportion than the 5.4% industrial average. The reason for Fulcrum Consulting's success in attracting women is the inclusive culture put in place when the company was founded – this is still paying dividends today.

**“We have always offered generous maternity leave and thought about how we can help employees who need to look after their family.”**

Clare Wildfire, a Director at Fulcrum Consulting, says: “Right back when the firm first started, they had a forward-thinking approach to pretty much everything – including growing talent and instilling family values into the firm. We have always offered generous maternity leave and thought about how we can help employees who need to look after their family. Employment legislation is only just beginning to catch up with us.”

As a result, Fulcrum Consulting has been able to retain a high proportion of the talented women it recruits. Staff at Fulcrum Consulting are

allowed to work flexibly to fit family needs. Clare sets the example, working from 7.30am to 3pm on Mondays to Thursdays and then from home on Fridays. This allows her to look after her two children.

New technology has been instrumental in allowing for a degree of flexibility that would not have been possible in the past, with an element of home-working as an option amongst many staff. “It's beneficial both to individual employees and the company,” Clare says. “Better for us to have someone working from home, fresh, than wasting two hours every day sitting on the train.”

Fulcrum Consulting has a good reputation for staff training, with a recent survey reporting that only one engineering firm spends more on staff development. “We're pushing boundaries, so we need highly skilled people. But, alongside the obvious need to train, our commitment to staff development stems from the same roots as our commitment to helping staff with caring responsibilities. If people like working for you and get something out of it, you will keep them on side,” Clare says. Women and men are given equal access to training opportunities.

Occasionally the company comes across people with less enlightened views on women in engineering, for example clients who ask for a male engineer or people from the construction industry taking a bad attitude when Fulcrum Consulting sends women to building sites. “Our response is always the same,” Clare says. “Fulcrum always sends the person we think best for the job in hand.”

Clare concludes: “We want people to be happy in their work and happy working for us, so we have made an effort to help those with responsibilities outside of work. If our efforts help women stay on and continue to develop their skills then this is massively beneficial because we don't lose out on their talent.”

## WOW Property

WOW Property is a fast growing estate agent which operates from one super branch and utilises the internet to advertise and sell its property portfolio. The company employs agents across the country to visit clients in their home, provide professional valuations and offer advice on strategies for selling. WOW Property employs 230 people and, because it recruits using WorkingMums.co.uk, a significant proportion of these are women.

Chief executive Gareth Robinson explains why they take this approach to recruiting: "We find that working mums are an under-utilised cohort of honest, skilled and motivated workers that can come in and work part-time or flexibly. This works really well for our business."

"We want people who have some experience, but we are absolutely not afraid to take people on who have been out of the workforce for two, three, five or even ten years. Typically their confidence will not be as high as you might find amongst other groups, but our preliminary training focuses on communication skills and is designed to overcome any initial nerves about re-entering the workforce."

**"We found working mums are an under-utilised cohort of honest, skilled and motivated workers."**

WOW Property does not set hours for new recruits, instead asking applicants what hours are convenient for them. Typically new employees will start on a few hours a week and then increase this over time as their confidence grows and their child or children start school.

However employees are not pressurised into increasing their hours because the management ethos is that family must come first.

The company is carefully structured so that there is always someone to step in when an employee wants to reduce their hours or has another child and takes maternity leave. "We make sure that we have more than one person who can fill each role," Gareth Robinson says. "This means we can be accommodating to employees' changing needs."

WOW Property offers returning mums careers, not just jobs. "We always look to promote from within," the chief executive comments. "We have just appointed six new managers and they were all internal appointments, women who started working for us as returners and have done a good job."

Gareth Robinson strongly believes that flexibility is the way forward for many small and medium-sized enterprises. "Unfortunately, not enough businesses see it, but there is a clear business case for employing women returners on a flexible basis. Instead of one person working 13 hours a day, you can employ two for 7 hours a day. They'll be much fresher. For us, WorkingMums.co.uk has enabled us to recruit many of the mothers that we need to fulfill this need. We have been able to take on 284 mothers through the site."

Robinson welcomes flexibility but is less sanguine about practices that push women back into work at the expense of family. "In the United States they have this culture of both parents working, all the time. That's something I fundamentally disagree with. What we have shown is that you can use returning mums' skills, and develop those skills, whilst not undermining families."

## Employer best practice: work-life balance

There are a range of measures that employers can take to help women to balance parenting or caring commitments with work, as demonstrated by KPMG, West Midlands Police, Fulcrum Consulting and WOW Property. Employers can:

- Ensure that new parents on leave do not lose touch with developments at work, for example by providing them with newsletters and ensuring ongoing personal communications.
- Ensure that as many employees as possible are allowed to work flexibly; parents and carers but other employees as well.
- Provide employees who would like to work from home with the facilities to do so.
- Assess employees based on outcomes, not the hours they spend at their desk.
- Recognise that mothers looking to return to work are an under-utilised cohort of often highly skilled workers.

# Adult education and training

## 9. Adult education and training

Women in their forties or older have on average fewer qualifications than their male counterparts. (Figure Two). Prior to the 1990s, boys out-achieved girls at school and university and this historic difference in attainment is evident amongst those now in the workforce. Approximately a quarter of women aged 45-54 have no qualifications, whilst only 16% of men from this age group have no qualifications.<sup>79</sup>

Barbara Follett MP, interviewed for this research when she was Under-Secretary of State at the Equalities Office, told us: "Obviously older women grew up in a time when the only skills they were expected to have were to do with cooking, cleaning or childcare, so it's not surprising that many older women have lower skills levels."

Gordon Marsden MP, Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, said: "Women from older age groups often missed out on education and training opportunities in the past. As a result, women will benefit disproportionately from the availability of adult education programmes."

Ensuring that adult education engages women is crucial to achieving the Government's national skills targets. The Government has set ambitious targets for dramatically increasing the skills of the UK workforce by 2020. As 70% of the UK's 2020 workforce is already in work, these targets will only be met by up-skilling adults.<sup>80</sup> Stephen Williams MP, Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, observed: "As many of the adults with low qualifications are older women, they should be a key priority for skills policy if targets are to be met and the country is to remain competitive."

### 9.1 International comparison

Although in the UK a higher proportion of women undertake training than in many European countries, not nearly as high a proportion of women in the UK benefit from adult education and training as in Sweden, Finland and Norway (Figure Two).

Country	Proportion of the population that has participated in education over the past twelve months (%)		
	Women (W)	Men (M)	Total (T)
Sweden	76.10	70.80	73.40
Finland	61.30	48.90	55.00
Norway	55.90	53.30	54.60
<b>UK</b>	<b>51.30</b>	<b>47.20</b>	<b>49.30</b>
Estonia	46.70	36.90	42.10
Slovakia	42.80	45.30	44.00
Germany	42.00	48.30	45.40
Austria	39.90	44.00	41.90
Latvia	39.00	25.90	32.70
Lithuania	38.70	28.70	33.90
Cyprus	38.20	43.00	40.60
Bulgaria	35.00	37.90	36.40
France	33.80	36.40	35.10
Spain	31.00	30.80	30.90
Poland	22.40	21.30	21.80
Italy	22.20	22.20	22.20
Greece	14.60	14.30	14.50
Hungary	9.60	8.30	9.00

Figure Two: proportion of populations taking training across Europe<sup>81</sup>

79 *Shaping a Fairer Future* (Women and Work Commission, 2006), p.51

80 *Leitch Review of Skills*, p.1

81 *Adult Education Survey* (2007). Data available on the Eurostat website (<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>). Please note that figures vary between surveys. For alternative data see *Promoting Adult Learning* (OECD, 2003); L. Christolm, A. Larson, A.-F. Mossoux, *Lifelong Learning: Citizen's Views in Close-up* (CEDEFOP, 2004); E. Kailis and S. Pilos, *Lifelong Learning in Europe* (European Communities, 2006)

Sweden has been particularly successful at engaging women in learning, including women from older age groups. In most European countries, the amount of education and training that women receive drops off substantially during the course of their working lives: according to one survey, across Europe as a whole 50% of women aged 25 to 34 report that they have received training over the past year, compared to only 28% of women aged 55 to 64. In Sweden, by contrast, the drop off is less marked: 62% of women aged 25 to 34 report that they have received training compared to 46% of 55 to 64 year olds.<sup>82</sup>

Beyond Europe, debate over public policy is increasingly recognising the importance of reducing inequalities in men's and women's education. In the United States, research has shown that women who up-skill enhance their productivity.<sup>83</sup> In Japan, where employers have traditionally been reluctant to train women for fear that they will later quit the workforce to start a family, there is increasing recognition that such an attitude is unsustainable and reduces national productivity.<sup>84</sup>

One way of increasing the number of women who are able to benefit from education and training is to ensure that they are able to fit learning around their family lives. International evidence suggests that this is an area in which the UK can improve. For example, a much higher proportion of individuals in the UK list family issues as an obstacle to learning (24.7%) than the European average (18.7%).<sup>85</sup>

## 9.2 Equal access for adult learners

Participants in our research observed that education and training has tended to focus on young people, not on adults. This has reduced the opportunities available to older women who wish to improve their skills.

John Hayes MP, Conservative Shadow Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, comments: "There has long been a perception that adult education is recreational. This is unfortunate because, whilst adult education can be recreational, it can also be an important way of spreading valuable skills, which of course is vital to the economy."

Although Government publications and policies now recognise the importance of adult education, which is becoming more prominent on the political agenda, there are still differences in the ways that young and adult learners are treated.

Baroness Margaret Sharp, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Innovation, Universities and Skills in the Lords, commented: "Adult learners should really have the same access to opportunity as up and coming generations. I am concerned that, whilst those aged under 25 are automatically entitled to free training for a first Level 3 qualification, there is no such entitlement for older learners. Of course, as so many older women don't have Level 3 qualifications, they particularly suffer."

**Recommendation 18: The Government should extend the entitlement to free training for a first Level 3 qualification to those aged over 25. This would be particularly beneficial to women, many of whom have missed out on opportunities to learn in the past.**

## 9.3 Sector Skills Councils

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) are employer-led organisations that play an important role in adult education and training. Participants observed that it is important to make sure that SSCs take into account gender issues in all their work.

David Lammy MP, interviewed for this research when he was Minister for Skills, said: "Each SSC is required to produce an employer-led Sector Skills Agreement...They include an analysis of the

82 E. Kailis and S. Pilos, *Lifelong Learning in Europe* (European Communities, 2006), p.2

83 C. Dougherty. 'Why are the returns to schooling higher for women than for men?' (Journal of Human Resources, 2005)

84 *Improve Per Hour Productivity so that Personal Life is not Sacrificed: Utilize the Latent Power of Women Now* (Japan Center for Economic Research, 2008)

85 L. Chrisholm, A. Larson, A.-F. Mossoux, *Lifelong Learning: Citizen's Views in Close-up* (CEDEFOP, 2004)

diversity of each sector. SSCs identify the factors behind the gender, age, ethnicity and disability profiles of their industries. This analysis informs SSC strategies, targets and measures to redress imbalances. Where gender segregation is identified by employers as an issue or where there is under-representation in an occupation this would form part of the action plan.”

Participants welcomed the inclusion of equality issues in Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs). However, they argued that it is important to assess whether SSCs are following up on the diversity elements of SSAs and taking into account diversity issues across the whole range of their work. SSCs are currently being individually assessed to decide whether their licenses will be renewed. This is referred to as the re-licensing process. Annette Williams argued: “SSC re-licensing is a key lever and as part of the process we must assess whether SSCs are working to address the gender skills gap in their sector.” Liz Smith, Director of unionlearn, agreed: “I hope that the UK Commission and other bodies involved in the re-licensing process take into account what SSCs are and aren’t doing to engage female learners.”

The re-licensing framework against which SSCs are being assessed does not mention gender. However it does state that SSCs must demonstrate that they ‘address priority skills issues.’<sup>86</sup> If up-skilling women is regarded as a priority skills issue, as it should be, then those assessing SSCs should take into account whether SSCs are making particular efforts to engage women in learning.

**Recommendation 19: As part of the Sector Skills Council re-licensing process, Ministers, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and the National Audit Office should assess whether SSCs are fully considering the needs of female learners.**

#### **9.4 Train to Gain**

An increasing proportion of the adult education budget is being invested in Train to Gain. This programme allows employers to train their staff on one of a number of courses with the costs of training being met by the State.

The courses available through Train to Gain are agreed in a non-contractual Sector Compact between SSCs and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Sector Compacts are to be re-assessed regularly to ensure that the courses available through Train to Gain continue to be those most relevant to employers. Participants argued that future negotiation of Sector Compacts should take into account gender issues, ensuring that the courses made available through Train to Gain are ones that are effective at reaching female learners and addressing their particular needs.

Liz Smith, Director of unionlearn, comments: “Train to Gain is an important vehicle for educating adults. We need to make sure that the programme is designed in a way that keeps in mind the importance of reaching women. This can be achieved through the Compacts.” Jacqui Henderson, Managing Director of Creative Leadership and Skills Strategies, agreed: “I have been involved in negotiating the Sector Compact for one of the SSCs and don’t think that consideration of gender issues has yet been embedded into the Train to Gain process in the way it perhaps might.”

**Recommendation 20: Future negotiation of Train to Gain Sector Compacts should include a gender impact assessment, ensuring that the courses made available through Train to Gain are effective at engaging female learners.**

#### **9.5 Adult and community learning**

Adult and community learning is delivered outside mainstream further education, work-based learning and higher education. It typically takes place in the evenings or at the weekend. 77% of those enrolled on adult and community learning (ACL) are female.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *Empowering SSCs – Employer Driven Skills Reform across the UK: A Relicensing Framework for Sector Skills Councils* (UKCES, 2008)

<sup>87</sup> Statistic provided by David Lammy MP in his interview for this research

Baroness Margaret Sharp, co-vice chair of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, said: “To reach hardest to reach groups, like women who left school with no qualifications and would never normally consider long courses leading to full qualifications, adult and community learning can be a vital first step. Short courses delivered at a neighbourhood level are valuable in themselves and can give people the confidence to go on to something more.”

Crucially, ACL also reaches women not in employment, thus complementing the Train to Gain programme. Dame Ruth Silver said: “Train to Gain could help many women in work learn new skills. But we must not forget the many women who need to gain new skills so they can return to work. There are more traditional adult education programmes such as ACL that can reach these women.”

Tim Boswell MP, co-vice Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, made a similar point: “As unemployment figures rise, we need to start thinking as much about women out of work as those with jobs. The economic downturn means we need to re-think our priorities.”

Given its potential impact on women, particularly women out of work, participants expressed disappointment at the downward trend in funding for adult and community learning. John Hayes MP, Conservative Shadow Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, said: “I think that the Government has failed to recognise the very positive impact that ACL can have on many groups within society, including women looking to return to work. The reason for this failure is that ACL does not lead to accredited qualifications so its effect can’t always be measured in statistics. Yet the effect is there.” Stephen Williams, Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, said: “Given that so many of those in adult and community learning are women, the cuts in funding in recent years will disproportionately affect women. This is a real concern.”

**Recommendation 21: The Government should reinvest in adult and community learning (ACL) as a key means of engaging hard-to-reach women and women out of work.**

## 9.6 Funding for students in further education

In 2005/6, 61% of adult learners in further education (FE) colleges and external institutions were female.<sup>88</sup> Like ACL, college courses can be particularly important to women out of work who wish to develop their skills. Gordon Marsden MP, Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, said: “One of the reasons that colleges are very important is that they are very good at re-engaging women who do not have jobs and have been out of education or training for a long time. Women are likely to approach an institution that is familiar to them and rooted in their community such as a college.”

John Hayes MP argued: “Colleges’ key learners are people in the local community. For women whose previous experience of education is a distant memory, this localism and understanding of the community is a very attractive feature.”

Participants also pointed to colleges’ experience in helping women who need to balance learning with parenting or caring commitments. Baroness Margaret Sharp said: “Colleges tend to be good at offering part-time courses. I am always surprised at just how many part-time courses there are at my local college, Moulton College. For women with children, or looking after an elderly relative, this can be very important.”

Some of the women interviewed for this research had themselves benefited from part-time college courses. Lesley Graham, a legal executive at Manchester law firm Sheldon Davidson, said: “I decided to become a legal executive in my thirties, at a time when I had children and needed to work. I was able to study because my college offered the course to become a legal executive part-time, one afternoon and one evening a week. I was also fortunate that my employer at that time allowed me to take the afternoon off.”

Given college courses suitability for many women, participants considered whether more funding should be made available to support students putting themselves through college courses. Tim Boswell

MP said: "Of course it is almost impossible to measure how many people decide not to do something because of cost. That said it seems highly likely that, were college students better supported, more women would re-engage in learning." There is more funding available for students in higher education than there is for their counterparts in FE.<sup>89</sup> For example, full-time students in HE are entitled to loans from the Students Loan Company whereas there is no equivalent for students in FE. Participants suggested that the Government should consider introducing a student loan system incorporating further and higher education. This would benefit female students on FE courses.

Participants also suggested that FE students should receive additional help with childcare costs whilst they take lessons. Currently, individual colleges decide what level of support to provide through the Discretionary Learner Support Funds. The average levels of funds available are lower than those that university students get towards the costs of childcare.<sup>90</sup> Tim Boswell MP, co-vice Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, said: "This is a very important point. If we want to encourage mothers to learn, they are likely to do so through colleges so the incentives need to be in place."

**Recommendation 22: Further education is very effective at engaging female learners. The Government should increase the financial support available to adult learners in further education.**

## 9.7 Apprenticeships

The Government plans to extend the availability of adult apprenticeships 'in order to sustain and improve our position in the global economy.'<sup>91</sup>

The Government has asked the new National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) to put in place a range of measures to ensure that equality issues are taken into account as the apprenticeship system is expanded. For example, the NAS will appoint 'super-mentors' to support under-represented apprentices.<sup>92</sup> Gordon Marsden MP, Chair of the Associate Parliamentary Skills Group, said: "I am pleased that the NAS has been asked to make extensive efforts to reduce gender segregation in apprenticeships."

However, these measures do not include any which aim to ensure wide availability of part-time apprenticeships. Part-time apprenticeships would be attractive to many women whose childcare or caring commitments preclude full-time work.

Anne Madden pointed out: "It is very difficult to find part-time apprenticeships, which of course is not good for women and others who have caring responsibilities to which they need to devote a portion of their time. It is a concern to me that all the literature on the new National Apprenticeship Service neglects to mention this and appears to be based around the assumption that apprenticeships are full-time. Traditionally they have been, but shouldn't we look to move beyond this?"

**Recommendation 23: The Government should ask the National Apprenticeship Service to explore ways of increasing the number of part-time apprenticeships. This would benefit women looking to take apprenticeships but who are unable to commit to full-time work.**

## 9.8 Higher education

Participants argued that higher education (HE) needs to become better at engaging learners outside of its traditional cohort of 18-21 year olds, including mature female learners.

Suggesting ways to achieve this, participants focused on provision of part-time courses. Gordon Marsden MP said: "As I learnt during my time working as a lecturer for the Open University, women

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89 See *Mind the Gap: Funding Adults in Further and Higher Education* (National Skills Forum, 2008)

90 *Ibid*, pp.99ff

91 *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England* (DIUS, 2007), p.9

92 *World Class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All* (DCSF and DIUS, 2008), p.48

from older age groups often cannot commit full-time to a three year course but they are interested in doing courses part-time.”

Given the importance of part-time courses as a means of reaching mature female learners, participants voiced concerns about fee arrangements for part-time students. Full-time university students have access to the student loan system, whereby they receive a loan which they can use towards paying fees. They are then not required to pay back the loan until they have finished their course and are earning above a certain threshold. In contrast, part-time students are required to pay fees up front.<sup>93</sup> Stephen Williams MP, Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, commented: “Current funding arrangements discourage people from taking part-time university courses and this can be a real problem for many women.”

Ministers have said that funding for part-time university students will be considered as part of a forthcoming review.<sup>94</sup> It is important that the Government reforms funding arrangements so that part-time students have access to loans on the same terms as full-time students.

**Recommendation 24: The Government should offer part-time students in higher education funding arrangements on the same terms as full-time students. This would benefit women looking to enter higher education but who are unable to commit to full-time study.**

### 9.9 E-learning entitlement for new parents

Participants discussed ways of making sure that mothers seeking to re-enter the workforce after having children have the skills that employers and the economy require.

Trials are beginning on a scheme whereby parents gain access to free childcare whilst they participate in training programmes. Called ‘Free Childcare for Training and Learning for Work’, the scheme will support 50,000 low income families in which one parent is working and the second wants to improve their skills so that they can return to work.<sup>95</sup>

Trials will also take place for a scheme whereby individuals who have been out of the workforce for over five years because of parenting or caring commitments will be eligible to receive up to £500 to enable them to return to work.<sup>96</sup>

These pilot schemes are to be welcomed. Alongside them, however, participants advocated introducing an additional scheme to help mothers learn new skills in the immediate months after childbirth, for example through learndirect.

**Recommendation 25: The Government should explore the possibility of funding new parents for an entitlement to free access to learndirect supported e-learning courses.**

### 9.10 Carers, benefits and learning

Carers find it harder to participate in education and training than the rest of the population. 16% of 16-24 year olds with 20-49 hours a week of caring commitments are students, compared to 26% of 16-24 year olds without caring commitments.<sup>97</sup>

The Carer’s Allowance and, in most circumstances, Income Support are unavailable to individuals on an educational courses that entails more than 21 hours a week of study. Baroness Margaret Sharp commented: “The Government is quite rightly committed to encouraging everyone to learn new skills. This 21 hours rule for those receiving the Carer’s Allowance goes against the spirit of what the Government is trying to achieve.”

93 *Mind the Gap*, pp.19ff

94 ‘Minister promises review of tuition fees for part-time students’ (The Guardian, 22 September 2008)

95 ‘Free childcare for 50,000 families’ (DCSF website, 8 September 2008)

96 *New Opportunities: Fair Chances for the Future* (HM Government, 2000), p.72

97 *Valuing and Supporting Carers* (DWP Select Committee, 2008), p.70

In addition participants noted that, for courses of less than 21 hours per week, recipients of the Carer's Allowance often find they are ineligible for financial assistance.<sup>98</sup>

**Recommendation 26: The Government should make the Carer's Allowance available to those on courses that require more than 21 hours a week of study and ensure that recipients of the Carer's Allowance are eligible for financial assistance on educational courses.**

### 9.11 Re-skilling

Participants observed that women who have been out of work for a long time often find that their skills are no longer sufficient to help them re-enter the workforce.

Many participants therefore stressed the importance of re-skilling, especially for those whose qualifications are now redundant or have lost currency. Women who achieved qualifications in their teens and twenties, but who have been out of the workforce for some years, often need to re-skill if they are to fulfil their potential in the workforce and contribute to UK productivity.

Following the recent decision on equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs), individuals no longer receive full funding support to study for a qualification if they already have a qualification at that level.

Barbara Follett MP defended this decision, arguing: "Nearly 60% of existing higher education students (with or without ELQs) are women. The ELQ policy decision is about incentivising universities to recruit and retain more of the six million adults with A-levels, or equivalent who do not currently progress to Higher Education. Overall, there are ten million women without a first higher education qualification. Women graduates like their male counterparts who want to re-skill, that is to say, get an equivalent or lower level qualification in a different subject can take a foundation degree, study a subject of strategic importance or have their costs co-funded by employers."

However, amongst other participants there was considerable concern about the effect the ELQ decision will have on women. Clare Morley said: "The ELQ decision will have a significant impact on many older women. Women who got five O-Levels years ago, but did not spend long in work after leaving school, will need help if they decide to re-enter work. They technically have Level 2 qualifications, albeit that these were taken years ago and have lost all currency, so they won't get funding for courses."

Many participants argued that the ELQ decision should be reversed. Stephen Williams MP stated: "The cut in funding for ELQ excludes many people from learning at a time when the rhetoric is all about encouraging learning. It should be reversed." John Penrose MP said: "The Government has said it is committed to increasing the skills of adults. I am afraid that this decision seems to fly in the face of this commitment."

A second option would be to allow people to study for an ELQ after a specified period of time has elapsed since they last received a qualification at that level. If the specified time was ten years, for example, this would mean that women who left school over a decade ago with five GCSEs or O-levels would be eligible to receive funding for a Level 2 course. A number of participants agreed that this might be a viable option.

**Recommendation 27: The Government should review its decision to stop fully funding equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs). The Government should assess a range of options including reversing the decision entirely and allowing individuals to study for an ELQ after a specified period of time has elapsed since they last achieved a qualification at that level.**

## Lesley Graham, Legal executive lawyer

Lesley Graham, 51, left school aged 16. She comments: "I grew up in Salford in a proper working class family, where A-levels and university were not on the radar. At 16 I wanted to start making money. I had a few O-levels and knew how to touch type, so started as a secretary."

Lesley worked as a secretary for a few years, before moving onto a number of other administrative jobs as well as working for the local dog track. She started a family and, as it grew, found she had less and less time to work. For seven years Lesley did not work at all, aside from occasional short term jobs.



In her early thirties, when her children were older, Lesley got a new job working as a typist for a company typing-up urgent work for barristers. "I found the work really interesting and wondered whether it would be possible to get into law more seriously," she says, "but I didn't know where to begin. In the end I wrote to Manchester University to ask about degrees. They suggested I try the Institute of Legal Executives (ILEX). ILEX's course qualifies you as a legal executive lawyer."

Lesley started on the course in 1991. She says: "Straight away I found it interesting. But a lot of elements of the course were very practical and I soon realised that to understand everything I needed to get a job with a solicitor."

At that time it was difficult for a woman with young children to find work in the legal profession. "There were no job shares or anything like that," she says. "It was full-time or nothing. I remember going to one interview and instead of covering my job competencies they asked how I would manage my household chores."

Eventually Lesley managed to find work in the Salford office of a Manchester law firm. They were willing to let her take a half day off to go to college for the ILEX course. She says: "The job was full-time, so juggling it with study was difficult because I also had the family to look after, but it helped that the office was near my home." Lesley worked her way through the ILEX programme over the next five years, doing well and achieving at least one distinction.

In 1998, now fully qualified, Lesley applied for a new job with a local solicitor who was putting together a small team. "He took me on to help with personal injury cases. In my previous job I had forty or fifty family cases to deal with, suddenly I had over two hundred personal injury cases. But by this time I was a very competent legal executive lawyer."

Lesley loved the job and has stayed in it ever since. Grateful to ILEX's help in turning her life around, she got involved in running the organisation, which culminated when she was elected as national President for the year 2007/8. She comments: "About three quarters of the people who go through ILEX are women, often women like me who have few qualifications but get a secretarial job in law and decide that they are capable of more. Because the course is part-time, you earn as you learn which is important for mature learners who can't afford to become full-time students and be without an income."

After they have qualified, legal executive lawyers can go on with their training to become fully-fledged solicitors. There are also new opportunities available for legal executive lawyers to become part-time Judges and Tribunal chairs, as well as to represent clients in court as advocates. There is the potential for legal executives to become partners in law firms.

Lesley says that two new secretaries in her firm, seeing her success, have decided to complete the ILEX course themselves. "I'm proud about this," she says. "I'm also proud that coming from my background with few qualifications I'm now a qualified legal executive lawyer."

## Pamela Baldwin, Optical Advisor

Pamela Baldwin, 45, is not impressed by the education she received at school. "The teachers didn't try with us," she says. "They just told us we weren't worth bothering with. I was told that I wouldn't be able to hold down a job."

Pam proved otherwise. The week she left school, aged 16 and with no qualifications, she got a job working in a fabric factory, a job she held for six years.

Pam explains what happened next: "I gave up the job when I became pregnant so that I could concentrate on the baby. After two years out of work, I got a part-time weekend job working at a hardware shop. Then after I had my second child, I left that and started at Asda on the tills. This suited me, as I could work part-time in the evenings. I'd look after the children in the day then my husband would be there whilst I worked."

Pam has worked part-time ever since, dividing her time between her family and job. She was to spend sixteen years at Asda, moving on from the tills to an administrative role and then back into the shop when told she would need to start at 6.30am if she wanted to carry on in the office role. "Except on this occasion," she says, "I have generally found employers are sympathetic to people with family commitments. If you are fair with them, they'll be fair with you."

"That said," she goes on, "other employees can resent it if they think that people with family are getting benefits. It might be easier were there the same rules for everyone."

**"Getting qualifications for the first time is great."**

Pam's last position at Asda came when the supermarket introduced an optometry department in the store. She was transferred to the new department, given in-house training and put to work helping customers. "I found I

really enjoyed this work," she says, "and I wanted to stay with it. When my manager moved to D&A, she invited me to go with her. I learnt that D&A offered nationally-recognised qualifications, so it seemed a good idea to move on."

D&A tested Pam and found that her numeracy skills were of a standard below that which they would normally accept for incoming employees. They also discovered that she has dyslexia. However, the company were impressed by her customer service and confident that they could help Pam learn.

**"It doesn't matter if you have children at home. If you find the right employer, you can always get on."**

With help from D&A, Pam had soon completed level 1 courses in literacy and numeracy, and levels 1 and 2 courses as an optical advisor. "Getting qualifications for the first time is great," she says. "I am now working towards completing the course to become a level 3 optical advisor, which is the equivalent to an A-level. The training is now much more about the management side of things. In future I will be able to go to employers with the pieces of paper to show that I have the skills to run an optometrist shop."

Pam is adamant that education does not end when you leave school. "It's never too late to go back into learning," she says. "You don't need to commit to something full-time. It doesn't matter if you have children at home. If you want to, and you find the right employer, you can always get on."

## Ya Ching Darnell, Union Learning Representative

Ya Ching Darnell, 36, grew up in Taiwan. When she was 28, Ya Ching moved to Liverpool to study for an Art degree at John Moores University. As her English was not very good, Ya Ching at first found communication difficult. "I used to be shy about speaking to people because I wasn't confident with my English," she says. "If someone came up to talk to me, I would back away."

In 2002, to get some extra money, Ya Ching got a part-time job as a cleaner for Mersey Travel. This marked a turning point. "I couldn't have chosen a better place to work," Ya Ching now says, "because the company is really supportive to employees with learning needs. They recognised that my English needed work, so put me onto the Skills for Life course with learndirect."

Ya Ching now found that she was able to do a wider range of jobs for the company. She says: "As my English improved, so too did my options. The company transferred me to a job in the aquarium which they run next to one of the ferry terminals. This was great and improved my English. I helped with the birthday parties, speaking to the children and parents."

Ya Ching completed her degree in 2004 and, now married, started working for Mersey Travel full-time. By 2007 she had gained Level 2 qualifications in English, Maths and ICT. Ya Ching was still hungry to learn, though, and she spoke to the tutor at one of Mersey Travel's learning centres. "I told him that my English writing skills needed work. He was brilliant and put me onto a Level 2 Academic English course at Liverpool Community College. I am still doing this course, two afternoons a week."

Ya Ching is now much more confident about writing in English. Mersey Travel has recognised her new skill and recently transferred her to their Community Link team. "It's a great job," she says. "I am helping out in the office as a clerk, doing the paperwork. This is brilliant because I

just wouldn't have been able to do this a year ago. I also get to help the team when we go out to meet the public which I very much enjoy."

Ya Ching has become a union learning rep. "I am so glad that I have had the opportunity to improve my skills," she says, "and I want to make sure that others have the same opportunity. So many people don't have the confidence to take courses, but I persuade them that they can do it."

**"I am helping out in the office... I just wouldn't have been able to do this a year ago."**

Ya Ching is particularly pleased to have been able to help one of the women she used to work alongside as a cleaner. "She was really nervous about going into learning," Ya Ching says, "and didn't think she could do it. But then she saw the benefits I got out of it and decided to enroll for a course."

As a union learning rep, Ya Ching finds that men and women have different learning needs. "With women," she says, "it's often difficult for them to find the time because of their family. We show them the wide range of options available, such as learning over the internet like I did." In 2007 Ya Ching's efforts to help others learn were recognised when she was made Merseyside Union Learning Rep of the Year.

Ya Ching would like to continue to help people learn. "One day I would love to teach Mandarin," she says, "just like people have helped me learn English."

## Denise Hannibal, Advisor on Pupil Engagement

Denise Hannibal, 44, has lived her whole life in Sandwell. Her early experiences were typical of girls from the area. "I left school with no qualifications," she says, "and immediately started a family. This was what was expected of me. I didn't really have any other aspirations. On occasion I did suggest that I try for a part-time job, but my family were against it."

In the mid 1990s Denise was kept very busy by her young family and caring for her mother, who had cancer. "After my mum died," Denise says, "I started to think it was time to bring in money myself." Denise completed a Childminding Certificate, which she now sees as the first step of her learning journey. After a short period working as a childminder, in 1996 she saw that the local school were advertising for a Learning Support Assistant to help look after pupils with special needs. "I'd never filled in an application form in my life, but the school knew me from parent evenings and I got the job."



The school sent her on a number of courses, covering important features of her new role such as behavioural management. Denise proved highly capable. A year later, under a Government initiative, the local authority received funding to employ a Learning Mentor in every school to look after children with special needs. Denise now held a range of relevant qualifications, so applied for one of these new positions in another local school. She was offered the job and sent on an additional, five-week training programme for the new role.

After a short time in the job Denise was promoted and given responsibility for all the Learning Mentors in the local area. As this role

required teaching incoming staff, Denise took a Training the Trainer course.

At about this time Denise decided to study for a degree with the Open University. With financial help from her employer, the local authority, she enrolled for the Social Sciences degree at the Open University. "I really enjoyed doing the OU course and it taught me a lot," she says. "I completed the first year, working in the evenings. In the end, though, I decided not to continue with the course. I'd proven to myself that I could do it, which was the most important thing."

In 2004 Denise successfully applied to become an Advisor on Pupil Engagement, another job at the local authority, and one she has remained in ever since. Denise has continued to learn, completing a range of courses, for example courses put on by the Institute of Leadership and Management.

Looking back over her career, Denise is very grateful to the local authority for supporting her through her career and always providing relevant training. "Learning was not really part of the culture for women from my area in Sandwell," she says, "so I am grateful to them for giving me the opportunity."

"At home there has sometimes been a bit of resistance to overcome. It can be difficult for my husband, despite the extra money that I now bring in. Actually, that's partly what makes it difficult for him, as there's an expectation that he should be the major earner."

However, Denise says that her career and the training that has come with it have been very beneficial for the family. "It's set a new example," she explains. "My third daughter has now started at university. She'll be the first person from either side of our family to get a degree."

In addition to her main job, in recent years Denise has worked as an advisor to the Children's Workforce Development Council. She has also written a manual entitled *Changes*, which is aimed at mentors helping parents and their children. "I wanted to write something that would help all the other 'Denises' out there," she says.

## B&Q

B&Q is the largest home improvement retailer in the UK, employing some 34,000 employees. The company is proud of the diversity within its workforce and is vocal about the benefits such diversity brings. Nearly half the retailer's workforce is female and a quarter is over the age of 50.

B&Q's Diversity Advisor, Leon Foster-Hill, explains: "Back in the late 1980s when others thought that employing older workers would be costly to business, we realised the benefits mature staff bring through their experience and practical skills." B&Q put their theory to the test and surprised many in the wider business community by opening a store in Macclesfield staffed entirely by older workers. "The store was a huge success. Alongside their bringing extensive life experience, we witnessed low levels of absenteeism, the flexibility to work schedules that mirrored business demand and a willingness to learn," says Leon.

Initially it was thought that older workers might require more training than their younger colleagues but the trial quickly disproved this. Much of B&Q's early diversity policy was shaped by the trial and now the company's comprehensive training programmes recognise the skills that new employees possess when they join and strives to develop them. "Our training is available to all employees, irrespective of age and is designed to fit in with working schedules. More than 60% of our staff work flexible hours so it is important that those doing so have the same opportunities to train as everyone else."

Many of those that have benefited from the company's focus on older employees are women. Leon explains: "Women from older age groups contribute enormously to our operation. Regardless of whether they have any formal qualifications, we find that women come to us with a range of skills. As an example, we tend to find those who have been at home on long career breaks to bring up children are patient and great negotiators, as well as being brilliant at multi-tasking. Of course, they also know an awful lot about the home." Leon continues: "For many of our mature female employees who have taken career breaks, access to training is vitally important because they may not have had the same access as others in the past."

Training at B&Q is based around a unique Learning and Development Framework (LDF). New recruits are given 40 hours of training through the LDF during their first three months with the company. For those who wish to progress further, the LDF includes additional learning 'steps', with pay increases linked to

progression through them. Leon says: "The link between pay and skills development is a great incentive to learn. For many female employees receiving training for the first time in years, pay increases are a great acknowledgement of progress."

The LDF is comprised of e-learning, workshops and on-the-job training. It covers everything from soft skills to product knowledge. Leon comments: "Everyone has different ways of learning. Our diverse approach to training reflects this. For example those women who have not received training for a long time tend to prefer an approach that they already feel comfortable with to ease them back in. They greatly benefit from the different types of training we offer to suit their learning preferences."

**"For many of our mature female employees who have taken career breaks, access to training is vitally important."**

Alongside in-house LDF training, some employees are able to work towards nationally-recognised qualifications such as the NVQ in Retail Skills. B&Q is also piloting a City and Guild's qualification in Home Improvement Knowledge. Leon explains: "These nationally-recognised qualifications are a great way for our people to learn new skills. We're piloting the qualification in Home Improvement Knowledge and aim for 5,000 of our staff to have gained it by the end of this year. By offering these nationally-recognised qualifications, we give all our staff, including those women from older age groups who have previously missed out on opportunities to gain formal qualifications, a second chance to do so."

Leon believes the benefits of training are two way and speak for themselves. He concludes: "There is a clear business case for consistently training. Those stores where our staff are most committed to learning are also overwhelmingly our top performing stores. We've found this to be true regardless of age or gender and from a business perspective I don't believe any further proof is needed to illustrate the importance of a diverse workforce and access to training."

## Employer best practice: Adult education and training

There are a range of measures that employers can take to improve provision of training and make training accessible and relevant for female employees, as demonstrated by B&Q. Employers can:

- Ensure that training programmes are available to everyone, irrespective of age.
- Ensure that training programmes are designed to fit in with employees' flexible working arrangements.
- Ensure that skills development is linked to rewards, such as pay increases, so that employees' efforts to develop their skills are recognised.
- Ensure availability of as wide a range of approaches to learning as possible.
- Ensure that, where possible, staff training leads to nationally-recognised qualifications.

# Appendices

# Appendix 1: Participants in the research

## Interview stage

### Parliamentarians

Tim Boswell MP	Co-Vice Chair, Associate Parliamentary Skills Group (Conservative)
Lorely Burt MP	Shadow Minister for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (Lib Dem)
Claire Curtis-Thomas MP	Chair, All-Party Group for Women in Science, Engineering and Design (Labour)
Barbara Follett MP	Under-Secretary of State at the Government Equalities Office (Labour)*
John Hayes MP	Shadow Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education (Conservative)
David Lammy MP	Minister for Skills (Labour)*
Eleanor Laing MP	Shadow Minister for Justice (Conservative)
Gordon Marsden MP	Chair, Associate Parliamentary Skills Group (Labour)
Anne Milton MP	Shadow Minister for Health (Conservative)
Julie Morgan MP	Chair, All-Party Group for Sex Equality (Labour)
John Penrose MP	Secretary, Associate Parliamentary Skills Group (Conservative)
Baroness Sharp of Guildford	Spokesperson for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Lib Dem)
Barry Sheerman MP	Chair, Children, Schools and Families Select Committee (Labour)
Baroness Thomas of Walliswood	Spokesperson for Women and Equality (Lib Dem)
Stephen Timms MP	Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform (Labour)*
Stephen Williams MP	Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Lib Dem)

\* Since moved office

### Employers

Anthias Consulting Ltd	Diane Turner (Consultant and Director)
British Telecommunications Group	Caroline Waters, (Director, People and Policy)
Fulcrum Consulting	Clare Wildfire, (Director)
KPMG	Sarah Bond (Diversity and Inclusion Director)
Marks and Spencer	Various
Memset	Kate Craig-Wood (Managing Director)
National Grid	Tony Moloney (UK Learning & Development Manager)
West Midlands Police	Inspector Danielle Corfield
WOW Property	Gareth Robinson (CEO)

### Individuals

Deborah Adshead	Director, JD Approach
Pamela Balwin	Dollond and Aitchison
Melanie Bennett	Quality Control Support Engineer, BAE Systems
Linda Chandler	Enterprise Strategy Consultant, Microsoft
Ya Chin Darnell	Merseytravel
Michelle Dow	Recruitment and Diversity Specialist, British Gas
Suzie Fry	Managing Director, Send Monthly
Lesley Graham	Legal Executive, Sheldon Davidson Solicitors
Denise Hannibal	LEA manager, Sandwell MBC
Lianne Kinsella	Admin Support, Merseytravel
Lisa Newton	Managing Director, Boogles Ltd
Verena Olnhoff	Plumber, former British Gas apprentice
Emma Parlons	Marketing Manager, Return to Glory
Janette Savage	Strategic Development Analyst, BT Public Sector
Tanya Tunnacliffe	Administrator, AEC Learning Centre, Larkhill
Jan Whitby	Legal Executive, Hay and Kilner Solicitors
Jessica Zeun	Director, JD Approach

**Roundtable discussion**

John Hayes MP	Shadow Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education (Conservative)
Simon Jones	CEO, Investors in People
Anne Madden	Head of Education, Skills and Employability Policy, EHRC
Gordon Marsden MP	Chair, Associate Parliamentary Skills Group (Labour)
Terry Marsh	Director, WISE
Clare Morley	Director of Education and Training, AAT
John Penrose MP	Secretary, Associate Parliamentary Skills Group (Conservative)
Dame Ruth Silver DBE	Principal, Lewisham College
Liz Smith	Director, unionlearn
Caroline Waters	Director, People and Policy, BT
Annette Williams	Director, UK Resource Centre for women in SET
Stephen Williams MP	Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Lib Dem)
Lord Young of Norwood	Under-Secretary of State for Skills and Apprenticeships

**Other contributors**

We would like to thank the following for their contribution to the research: Wendy Albutt (Learning and Development Manager, Dollond and Aitchison); Adrian Beddow (Communications and Media Manager, Ufi); Phil Craven (Head of National Occupational Standards, UK Commission for Employment and Skills); Tina Fahm (Director, Women's Leadership Network); Joanne Garrison (Women and Work Project Manager, UK Commission for Employment and Skills); Matilda Gosling (Senior Manager (Research and Policy), City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development); Jacqui Henderson (Managing Director, Creative Leadership and Skills Strategies); Jane Jones (Director of Policy and Communications, Investors in People); Ann Keeling (Former Head of Gender Equality, Government Equalities Office); Anne Kane (Former Equalities Advisor, Greater London Authority); Sue Lawton (Director of Development, WEConnect); Kate Martin (Communications Manager, AAT); Pablo Lloyd (Deputy Chief Executive, UFI); Gillian Nissim (Chief Executive, Working Mums); John O'Sullivan (Chief Executive Officer, Ten2Two); Baroness Margaret Prosser (Chair, Women and Work Commission); Professor Kate Purcell (Warwick Institute for Employment Research); Michele Thomson (Investors in People); John Westwood (Director of International Development, Institute of Legal Executives). Thanks also go to everyone at the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative meeting in Coventry who shared with us their views on the gender skills gap.

## Appendix 2: Acronyms

<b>AACS</b>	Adult advancement and careers service
<b>ACL</b>	Adult and community Learning
<b>AAT</b>	Association of Accounting Technicians
<b>BT</b>	British Telecommunications Group
<b>CBI</b>	Confederation of British Industry
<b>CEG</b>	Careers education and guidance
<b>CIPD</b>	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
<b>DBERR</b>	Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform
<b>DCSF</b>	Department for Children, Schools and Families
<b>DIUS</b>	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
<b>DTI</b>	Department of Trade and Industry
<b>DWP</b>	Department for Work and Pensions
<b>EOC</b>	Equal Opportunities Commission
<b>EHRC</b>	Equality and Human Rights Commission
<b>ELQ</b>	Equivalent or lower qualification
<b>GDP</b>	Gross domestic product
<b>GEO</b>	Government Equalities Office
<b>HE</b>	Higher education
<b>HM</b>	Her Majesty
<b>IAG</b>	Information, Advice and Guidance
<b>IS</b>	Income Support
<b>IT</b>	Information Technology
<b>Ilex</b>	Institute of Legal Executives
<b>JSA</b>	Jobseekers Allowance
<b>LSC</b>	Learning and Skills Council
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>NAS</b>	National Apprenticeship Service
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>Ofsted</b>	The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
<b>PSHE</b>	Personal, social, health and economic education
<b>SET</b>	Science, engineering and technology
<b>SSA</b>	Sector Skills Agreement
<b>SSC</b>	Sector Skills Council
<b>SME</b>	Small and medium-sized enterprise
<b>TUC</b>	Trades Union Congress
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UKRC</b>	The UK Resource Centre for Women in science, engineering and technology
<b>UKCES</b>	UK Commission for Employment and Skills
<b>WISE</b>	Women into science, engineering and construction



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