All-Party Parliamentary Group
On Youth Affairs

Minutes of the AGM, held at 6pm, Wednesday 10th July
Committee Room 9, House of Commons

Universal Credit; in relation to young people

Guest Speaker:

Dame Anne Begg MP, Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee.

The meeting was chaired by Julie Hilling MP (Lab, Bolton West), Chair of the APPG.

1. Briefing

Prior to the meeting, a briefing note was distributed to attendees to highlight key issues surrounding the Universal Credit and to encourage preparation ahead of the session. A briefing session was also held from 5pm until 6pm to help young people prepare.

2. Introduction and welcome

AGM Chair, Julie Hilling opened the AGM by announcing that the MPs present were required to partake in the annual vote to elect the chair and officers to the APPG. All MPs present unanimously voted to re-elect Julie Hilling MP as chair and reinstated the other officers of the group.

The officers of the group are now as follows:

Chair – Julie Hilling MP
Vice Chair – Simon Hughes MP
Treasurer – James Morris MP
Secretary – Sir Peter Bottomley MP

Julie Hilling then briefly set out the format of the meeting; a question and answer discussion with the members of the various youth groups present.

3. Guest speaker

Dame Anne Begg MP gave introduction to the Universal Credit and how it will operate.

She said that as part of her work as Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee; she had questioned the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan-Smith and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Lord Freud. She said both

Ministers had made it clear they wanted to create a "cultural change" in the benefit system.

She stated that Universal Credit was a single working age benefit and a significant reform of the welfare state. It is comprised of all current benefits, but given as one single payment. She explained that Universal Credit would be reduced as a person's income increased. She explained that she agreed with the principle of trying to simplify the benefits system, as it had previously been too complex for people to understand.

However, she expressed concern that people's lives were in some cases very complex and simplifying the welfare system might inflict further problems on the certain individuals.

She also explained that the 'roll out' of the Universal Credit was a complex process, and highlighted the pilot had begun in Ashton-under-Lyme where only people who were single, on Jobseeker's Allowance and had a bank account were permitted to enrol in the new programme. The total number of people thought to have been enrolled on the pilot was approximately 290.

She also highlighted reforms announced in the 2013 Spending Review which will mean Job Seeker's Allowance will not be given in the first seven days of a person being enrolled and searching for work.

She concluded her remarks by explaining that in her view, the Government should not rush this process of enrolling people onto Universal Credit, as doing so could damage many families' lives.

4. Discussion and feedback from young people

Julie Hilling (JH) thanked **Anne Begg (AB)** for her comments and encouraged young people to ask questions and highlight their own experiences in relation to the issue.

Ashley and Daniel from Prince's Trust said the biggest problem for young people was the lack of information about benefits, and a fear of what might happen to them in the future. Many people had been on Jobseeker's Allowance for such a long period of time that they did not qualify for the initial roll out of the Universal Credit. They also said that many young people did not want to take the first low skilled job that appeared as many had career aspirations they felt would not be satisfied by that job.

Responding, **AB** said that she understood their points and felt the Government should take their time in reforming the welfare state. She also highlighted the Government's move to monthly rather than bi-weekly payments of Jobseeker's Allowance.

Emma from the British Youth Council/Girl Guiding said there were many young people without the skills to write a CV and therefore use the time spent on the Job Seeker's Allowance programme as effectively as possible. She said the Government should think as much about learning the skills required to search for a job, in addition to searching for the job. She said Jobcentres would only be effective if this was understood.

Elizabeth from the Ycentres said Jobcentres must train people how to gain the interview skills needed to perform well in interviews. She also said many young people

she worked with lacked the confidence to approach people for help in seeking a job and lacked felt uncomfortable in interview situations, which could deter them from gaining a job.

Members of Warwickshire YMCA said they had witnessed examples where people had been sanctioned for not abiding by the rules in perhaps unfair circumstances. Certain people, they said had been penalized for not attending the meeting with their Jobcentre practitioner, but had been traveling to an interview so were unable to attend. They had subsequently lost their JSA payment.

Geraldine from Depaul UK expressed concern for young and vulnerable people. She said many of them were falling victim to payday loans, and many lacked the confidence to search for a job. She also said that many Jobcentre staff lacked the empathy to engage constructively with young people searching for a job. She said the new sanctions were creating a hostile environment at many Jobcentres across the country.

In response, **JH** said this may not necessarily be the fault of Jobcentre staff themselves. She said that budget cuts and redundancies had put a strain on resources of Jobcentres, so there was less time for the personal side of the job. She pointed out that there were more unemployed people than computers in most Jobcentres and this issue needed addressing.

Charlotte from St John Ambulance said that many young people struggle to manage a budget for 2 weeks and the reforms to pay JSA monthly would only increase this issue.

AB said that Jobcentre staff should direct young people to the Citizen's Advice Bureau in order to address those issues of lack of information, skills or confidence when searching for a job. She said the Government should define what a 'vulnerable claimant' is in order to make it clearer for Jobcentres as to who needed further assistance with their employment support. She also said that there had been a clear increase in the number of people using food banks due to the reforms of the JSA that had been mentioned previously.

Zain from St John Ambulance asked how people who had degrees could use Jobcentres and said that there were many people who felt the jobs they had been matched to were too low skilled for their abilities.

Annette from Depaul UK said that Universal Credit did not make sense in the sense that single people could receive more money for housing than a couple. She said that many people who were a couple were actively taking the decision to live apart because they would lose out if they lived together. She also said many young people lacked the discipline to manage the monthly budget given to them in the JSA payment.

AB said that the New Enterprise Allowance was an encouraging scheme launched by the Government, but it would be difficult to administer if careful examination of people's different backgrounds was not taken into account.

JH said that the Government had intended to launch a review into the sanctioning process included in the JSA programme. She said there had been rumours that Jobcentres would be placed on a performance related scheme, but the Government had refused to comment on this speculation.

Following this, **Simon Hughes MP** said that young people should not bury their heads in the sand over this issue, and they should seek as much help as possible. He said that the concept of the Universal Credit was constructive, but it relied on the feedback from young people in order to make the programme a success and help the most vulnerable. He concluded by saying that local support existed, whether in the form of MPs or local councils, there would always be an individual in place to offer support to a young person who was confused or felt helpless.

JH closed the session by thanking MPs and the young people for engaging in the meeting, and said that the process of Universal Credit implementation required the input of young people across the UK, so she urged young people to stay involved in this issue.

Attendees

Name	**Organisation**
Julie Hilling MP	Chair of Youth Affairs APPG
Anne Begg MP	Chair of Work and Pensions Select Committee
Simon Hughes MP	Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats
Kate Green MP	Lab, Stretford and Urmston
Lillian Greenwood MP	Lab, Nottingham South
Michael Connarty MP	Lab, Linlithgow and East Falkirk
Office of Andrew Stephenson MP	
YMCA	
BYC	
BYC	
NCVYS	
Safer London Foundation	
We Have a Voice	
Centerpoint	
Depaul UK	
GirlGuiding	
The Prince's Trust	
NAYT	
EV Arts	
vInspired	
St Giles Trust	
Methodist Church	
4Children	
St John Ambulance	
UK Youth	
Connect Communications	