**Youth Unemployment in Rural Areas- What can be done?
Working Paper written for project TRANTEL**

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the extent to which transport, skills and rural isolation influence the ability of young unemployed people (16-24 years) to access job and training opportunities from the perspective of service providers and employers. The paper seeks to outline the measures that businesses are taking to improve their employees ICT skills and access to employment and training opportunities.

KEYWORDS: young people; unemployment; rural; ICT; transport

1. Introduction

Rural populations are dispersed, if not isolated, and served by at best intermittent or non-existent public transport networks. The increasing range of ICT and transport related provisions in rural areas are designed to lower barriers to ICT learning and use; support the 'transport-poor' who lack the means of mobility; and reach out to a wide range of individuals.

This paper seeks to address several key questions:

- What are the potential benefits and barriers associated with the delivery of ICT and transport provision for job and training seekers?;
- What type and extent of provision should be given to young unemployed people living in rural areas to enable them to access employment and training opportunities?; and
- What role can and should businesses and other service providers play in achieving this? in terms of financial support and promotion.

2. The study area in context and methodological issues

The study is based on three data sources: questionnaire surveys of four rural areas and two focus group studies. The aim is to establish barriers to young people accessing employment and training opportunities; and looks at what can be done to overcome barriers and improve access to opportunities using ICT and transport, while identifying the feasibility of this.

The questionnaire survey

The details of 80 different companies were compiled using an Internet search engine- selected[1] to represent a range of size, nature of industry and location in each of the four case study areas. All of those selected were located within 30 minutes travel time of the initiative being investigated. This was in response to work conducted by McQuaid *et al.*, (2001: 364) which revealed that the UK mean travel-to-work time is 21.5 minutes (Dex *et al.,* 1995), although a range of factors including demographic, human capital, spatial, external environmental and monetary factors affect jobs seekers 'maximum travel-to-work time'. Given that money was a factor which limited people travelling further we selected companies based within 30miunutes travelling distance of each initiative as it was determined that unemployed people would have less money to travel to work and were less likely to travel for more than 30 minutes. Similarly, work conducted by Vince (2003) revealed that the majority of the young people living in the Forest of Dean would be prepared to travel up to 30 minutes. However some young people surveyed considered that for work or training opportunities deemed to be 'excellent' where willing to travel further (Vince, 2003).

Each of the 80 companies was contacted by telephone, requesting their help via a questionnaire. Where businesses expressed a willingness to participate a questionnaire was sent out to them. Those who expressed an initial willingness to participate were later contacted if the questionnaire had not been returned and some interviews were conducted over the telephone; while others withdrew their offer. Businesses located within the Powys region were generally more willing to participate, while those located within Devon were the least willing. Similarly secondary and tertiary sector companies were willing to cooperate while other sectors were less willing. Many companies who were less willing to participate where smaller based companies who 'did not have the resources to participate'. In the Forest of Dean there was a general unwillingness by some to participate because there was a general feeling that 'so many studies had taken place, yet nothing was happening', therefore there was 'no point in contributing further'.

The focus groups studies
The second phase convened a focus group in the Forest of Dean. This was composed of members of the Forest of Dean Business and Education Partnership. Participants were questioned about: the barriers to young people accessing employment and training opportunities; the role that ICT and transport initiatives could play in overcoming those barriers; and the role employers saw themselves playing in the delivery of transport and ICT initiatives to improve access and skills.

A focus group was then formed of transport specialists and IT experts, regeneration and economic officers, Gloucestershire Development Agency, education and training providers and potential employers. Some of the participants were project partners while others were selected given their role. Participants were asked about their experiences of barriers to access; views on the four schemes investigated; and a

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[1] 20 businesses from each case study area were selected- 5 primary, 5 secondary, 5 tertiary and 5 quaternary sector companies

discussion of potential solutions- looking at the practical feasibility and the level of support they would be prepared to give the possible options.

3. Discussion- Barriers to young people accessing job and training opportunities

Figure 1 reveals that transport was considered to be the most significant barrier to young people accessing employment and training opportunities, by the employers who completed the questionnaire survey. This compliments more detailed work conducted by Keynon *et al.* (2003) which reveals that a poverty discourse is occurring where those who are reliant on public transport are severely disadvantaged given the severe limitations of public transport provision in rural areas.

Figure 1 illustrates that generally employers who completed the questionnaire believed that skills were the second greatest barrier, after opportunities, experienced by young people accessing employment and training opportunities.

Figure 1. The key factors influencing youth unemployment in rural areas according to businesses
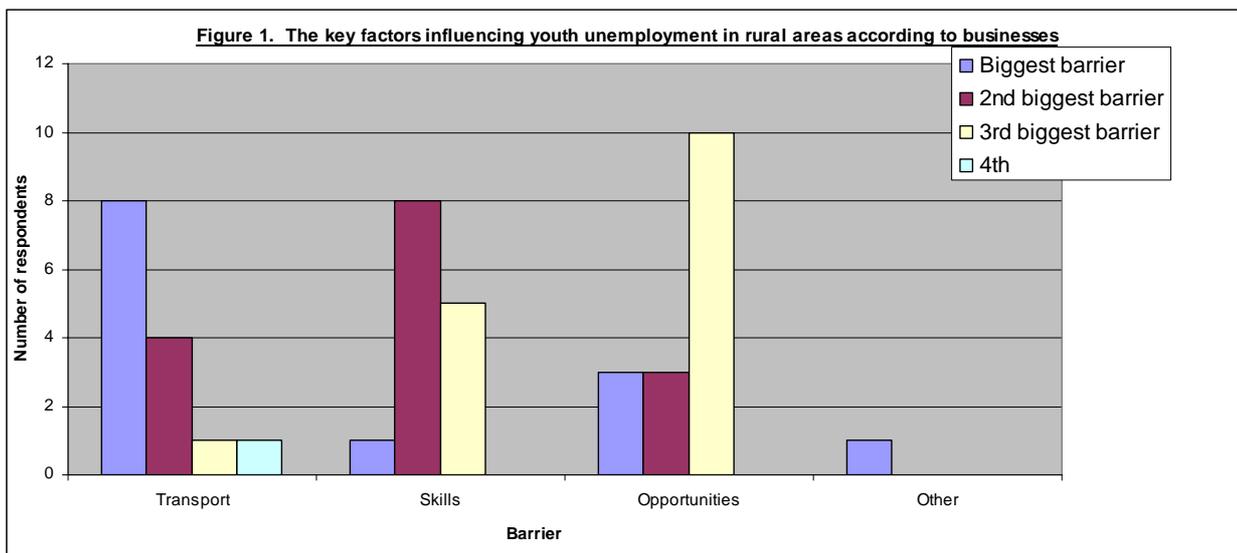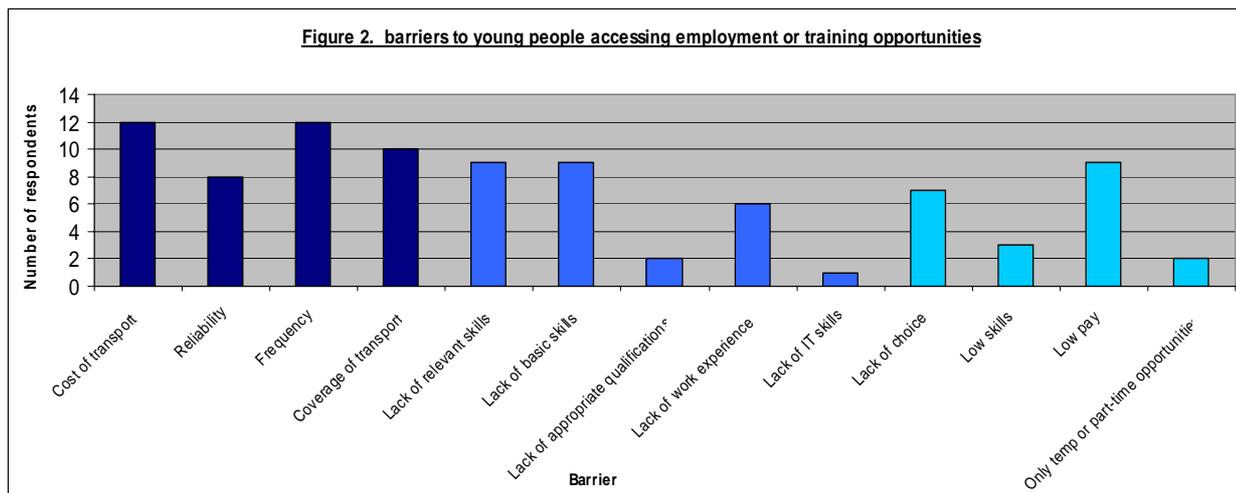
Figure 2 illustrates the individual factors which businesses consider act as barriers to young people accessing employment and training opportunities. All of the individual factors, i.e. cost, reliability, frequency and coverage, relating to transport were frequently cited by businesses. Similarly many of the factors relating to skills, in particular a lack of relevant and basic skills and a lack of work experience were frequently cited as factors.

Figure 2. barriers to young people accessing employment or training opportunities

Number of respondents

14
12
10
8
6
4
2
0

Cost of transport
Reliability
Frequency
Coverage of transport
Lack of relevant skills
Lack of basic skills
Lack of appropriate qualifications
Lack of work experience
Lack of IT skills
Lack of choice
Low skills
Low pay
Only temp or part-time opportunities

Barrier

Analysis of the results did not reveal any real differences in the ranking of the barriers in the different localities surveyed. Similarly no relationship was identified between the sector that a business was in and the type and extent of the barriers experienced. However, this may be a result of limited information, as opposed to general findings, principally because of the very low response rate from primary and quaternary sector businesses.

The findings support work conducted previously by Vince (2003) which revealed that young people living in the Forest of Dean believe that they are experiencing difficulties accessing employment and training opportunities principally because of transport- relating to cost, reliability and frequency of the service. Coverage was also deemed to be a problem when seeking transport for social reasons, e.g. to get to local pubs (Vince, 2003). There were mixed views, from the young people regarding the relative significance of skills and opportunities as barriers, although generally a lack of opportunities was considered to be slightly more significant.

Many of the employers responding to the questionnaire who did not cite transport to be the greatest barrier frequently added a caveat which revealed that this was principally because of their location within a town or city centre. Research illustrates that transport networks were principally provided around larger centres (GLMIU, 2002; GCC, 2000; DCC, 2000). Research by GLMIU (2002) identified that a significant proportion of the job and training opportunities provided in the Forest of Dean were located within the main centres, for example Lydney, Coleford and Cinderford. The research went on to concluded that a large proportion of those working in the main towns were also resident there. It is therefore supported that for those living and working within the larger centres in the Forest transport was less of a problem.

Similarly a very large proportion of the participants of the Forest of Dean Education and Business Partnership (FoDEBP) focus group cited transport as the greatest barrier to young people accessing employment and training opportunities. The issue of transport, or lack of it, was perceived to affect the whole of the rural population living and working within the Forest of Dean. There was a general

feeling that those who were unable to use private transport, either because of age, health or financial ability, were disproportionately disadvantaged. Young people, in particular those who are unemployed, were one group who are more likely to be significantly disadvantaged. This was principally because they lack the financial capability to secure their own private transport. There was a general agreement that young people are further disadvantaged if their parents are unemployed, given that access to transport, for example lifts, is even more difficult.

There was a general consensus by the FoDEBP that a lack of skills held by young people acted as a slightly bigger barrier compared to a lack of opportunities. It was considered by both the education and training providers and employers that this was because of a lack of understanding and awareness of the type of opportunities available to young people rather than a lack of opportunities overall. For example, one teacher remembered how one young person did not want to work in a school as they did not want to become a teacher, with no awareness of the other positions available within schools. Similar responses were met from hospitals where young people did not want to become nurses and did not truly know what else was available for them. This was supported by Serrano (2001) who identified that:

> 'Joblessness is caused by individuals' inadequacies, rather than on a lack of opportunities within the labour market".

(Cited in McQuaid and Lindsay, 2002a: XX)

In addition McQuaid *et al.* (2002a) revealed that many, particularly men, were reluctant to work outside of traditional employment roles. Given the diminishing manufacturing sector, across the UK, particularly evident in the Forest of Dean this has created significant problems in terms of training needs and individuals levels of satisfaction regarding employment opportunities. Similarly there is a lack of awareness of 'new' service-based opportunities becoming available, particularly geared to part-time opportunities. In the Forest of Dean part-time employment in the Forest of Dean increased at a greater rate than full-time employment between 1995/2001 (ONS 2001, GLMIU, 2003). In addition while the largest employment sector, manufacturing, declined at a significant rate of 16%; the service sector grew by 14%, similar to the Gloucestershire average (ONS, 2001; GLMIU, 2003). Similarly there are inadequacies on the part of individuals to accept that their levels of skills are inadequate for the positions they seek. Participants of the first focus group study raised concern over an apparent lack of realism held by young people and job seekers generally. For example many young people were not concern about selecting work experience placements to suit their long-term aspirations and goals and considered this unnecessary. Similarly, the Gloucestershire household survey revealed that 42% of those wanting a professional or associate level position were qualified to level 2; highlighting this element of unrealistic ambition (GLMIU, 2002) by some people.

The participants of the second focus group study revealed that this was a significant issue with the young people living in the Forest of Dean. Many described the apathetic nature of young people characterised by low aspirations and ambitions. This perception was confirmed by those who attended the third focus group who

worked with young people. While many participants of the third focus group study generally agreed, some considered that there was a genuine lack of choice available to young people living within rural areas, particularly within the Forest of Dean. Some participants remarked that once you took out vacancies relating to care, catering and construction, there were extremely few alternatives.

Harper *et al* (2001) identified that educational ability has a large and significant effect on the occupational aspirations for 16-23 year olds. Those with professional fathers and well educated mothers tend to be more academically able. This transpires into a cycle of continual XXX. Robertson *et al* (1990: 832) went on to reveal that 'family background still has a strong independent effect on occupational aspirations' including income, family attitudes to learning, social class and parents educational attainment. This was supported by all participants of the focus groups who highlighted that parental involvement was a huge issue in the Forest. It was identified that many young people were either pressured into going out of the Forest in search of 'better' opportunities; while others where pressured into following in the family footsteps where generations worked in the same businesses.

McQuaid (2003) revealed the strong importance of social networks, principally through word of mouth, in job seeking. All of the participants involved in education or learning and employers confirmed that this was an extremely important method of recruiting within the Forest of Dean. There was a general consensus that for: in-migrants; those who have been unemployed for a length of time; and those whose family members have been unemployed, informal network are difficult to maintain and new ones almost impossible to establish- making it very difficult to secure opportunities within the locality. Vince (2003) revealed that many young people felt that they were at a disadvantage as they did not conform, i.e. behave appropriately in the past and therefore were not considered for local vacancies. This has clearly created a two tier system whereby for some social networks have facilitated access to job opportunities for with good local contacts; while the lack of social networks has created a significant barrier to employment for others.

The GLMIU (2002) revealed that there are a high proportion of young people living in Gloucestershire who are unsatisfied with their current progress. An additional 5% of 16-24 year olds stated that they have no ambition and 10% did not know what they want to do. It was identified that those working in lower-skilled occupations[2], those who are unemployed or inactive, and those lacking qualifications[3] are less satisfied on average. This appears to imply an 'ambition deficit' perhaps linked with disaffection and failure to progress in learning and employment.

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[2] There are fewer people who live within the Forest of Dean who work in managerial/senior official (14%), professional (9%) and technical and associate professional (12%) occupational groups than the county, regional and national averages (ONS, 2001). The Forest of dean also has the highest percentage of unskilled workers in Gloucestershire, particularly concentrated in Coleford and Lydney (ONS, 2001).
[3] There are more people living in the Forest of Dean with no qualifications (30%) than the national average (29%) (ONS, 2001).

In addition there was a stigma attached to living in rural areas from those living outside. Many of the participants of the first focus group reflected on their own past, whereby they experienced forms of bullying by those living in more urban areas.   A study by Jamieson (2000) revealed that there was a mindset of derogatory views of rural people, deployed by those who have left rural areas to pursue other opportunities. The participants also highlighted that such views where helped by those living in urban areas who did not understand rural issues. It was felt that this, along with other factors result in low expectations held by young people in the Forest and caused some individuals from seeking opportunities provided outside of the locality.

It was generally considered by the education and training providers participating in the focus groups that the 16-24 age cohort under investigation may have missed out on IT training, which would have implications for the future; recognising that something would have to be done as this would be an increasing barrier to this cohort gaining opportunities.   It was recognised however that those currently studying in local schools and colleges do have IT skills and good access; in part because of the strong ICT teaching element in schools and colleges and because of the wide range of educational and community based ICT centres located within the Forest now.

Childcare was also highlighted to be a major barrier to some rural young people accessing employment and training opportunities by the participants of the third focus group. This barrier was demonstrated in Powys during a fieldtrip to the telecentre project. Here young mothers expressed frustration regarding the lack of available childcare in the area.   They also described the limited opportunities available to them because of the distance involved accessing childcare provision; frequently having to make long and complex journeys. In most cases this proved very costly to individuals. While some found this prohibited them from working at all many others identified that it severely limited the opportunities available to them; forcing many to undertake inappropriate opportunities. Academics illustrate that this problem is common across the majority of rural areas; revealing 'frequently minimal and often non-existent levels of formal childcare services' (Halliday *et al*, 2001: 423; Little *et al*, 1991). However it was identified that this is not the only problem.   The 'nature of women's domestic role and…cultural construction' whereby the woman's place is at the centre of the rural family put pressure on women to conform to this role as those who do not are frequently marginalised (Hughes, 1997; Little and Austin, 1996).   Halliday *et al* (2001) identifies that this gives many women relatively little choice of pursuing other opportunities.

'Perception' was identified as an additional barrier…

These problems are thought to be compounded by low aspirations held by some young people living in the Forest. A few of the participants of the first focus group acknowledged that where young people left the Forest, either to attend University or other opportunities, many found it difficult to return after completing a degree as

they feared that they needed approval from outside to be successful inside the Forest.

Recruitment of young people

The responses from the questionnaire survey revealed that very few companies operated schemes specifically designed to recruit young people. Of those that did, less than 5% of the sample, it was principally achieved through modern apprenticeship schemes. Some firms said they were investigating offering modern apprenticeships[4] but gave now reasons as to why this was not already in place; or the reasoning behind their .

The New Deal programme was being used by one of the companies surveyed although it was not specifically targeting young people. When investigating the New Deal programme[5], via the internet, it was identified that several larger companies are supporting the programme nationally. However, when a rural branch of one of those companies was contacted to complete the questionnaire they did not make reference to the scheme. The reason for this is not known, but this could be due to poor networks between businesses and employment and training agencies working in rural areas; or a general lack of available opportunities within rural areas to offer placements.   Research conducted by JRF (XXXX) revealed that many rural employers have a poor knowledge of the New Deal and even those who are aware of the programme frequently feel unable to become involved because of an inability to meet minimum training requirements or to provide access to external forms of training.

Other larger companies undertook recruitment drives, attending local school and college job fairs. Some of those who did not operate schemes to specifically recruit young people said that equal opportunities policy and offering the job to the most suitable candidate was the principle reason why young people were not specifically considered for jobs.

Other firms, operating in the Forest of Dean, offered higher or further education sponsorships to some employees where the potential of an individual was realised and skills were necessary for career development or to benefit the business. It was considered that transport acted as a significant barrier to companies training employees; particularly the smaller organisations where staff resources could not be lost and where in-house training was particularly difficult because of a general lack of resources, in terms of staff expertise, finances and time.

The Forest of Dean currently has a good supply of transport provision for those attending educational institutions both within and outside of the Forest. The Forest of Dean has fewer full-time students (2.2%) compared to the Gloucestershire average and the British average of (2.6%) (ONS, 2001). In addition double the

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[4] Modern apprenticeships offer on-the-job paid training opportunities to young people, enabling young people to gain recognised vocational qualifications.
[5] The New Deal programme offers those on benefits an opportunity to obtain work related training.

number of 16-18 year olds living in the Forest attend some form of employment, either with or without associated training (GLMIU, 2002). This has implications for the type of public transport provision required within the Forest. It is clear that public transport provision must be geared towards work-based provision as opposed to educational based transport provision which reportedly is very beneficial.

Knowledge of ICT and transport initiatives operating in rural localities

There was a general lack of awareness by all of the businesses surveyed via the questionnaire of transport and ICT initiatives operating within their locality. Where knowledge was expressed this was solely due to the respondent using the service themselves, i.e. a bus service operating in Lincolnshire and networked ICT centres in Powys rather than companies helping individuals find initiatives which could boost their ICT skills or access.

Participants in both of the focus groups believed there was a general lack of awareness of existing public transport provision as opposed to a genuine need. It was proposed that increased promotion of the services available could help to overcome this. Similarly making access to information regarding transport, either through websites or other forms could help to raise the profile of public transport. There was a genuine desire from the young people surveyed for the integration and extension of the existing public transport system. The DFT (2001) report that around 48% of rural households are with a 13 minute walk away from an hourly or better bus service, compared to the national average of 89%. Of the young people spoken to they were more likely to use this mode the close they lived to a bus stop. By making the routes flexible it is likely that this will increase patronage level of bus services. Similarly the participants of the focus group hinted that if bus and rail timetables were integrated this may help to lure people away from their cars and onto alternative modes.

Similarly both of the focus groups highlighted the need to improve existing services, in particular the railway service. The real-time information display, CCTV and lighting, to improve safety, similar to that incorporated into the InterConnect scheme, operating within Lincolnshire, were all cited by participants to encourage patronage.

In the Forest of Dean there was a general presumption by employers that it was an individual's responsibility to make adequate transport arrangements. All of those surveyed believed that the majority of employees had their own private mode of transport. The employers spoken to said that individuals, generally, did not have to demonstrate their ability to access work at the interview, although general attendance and punctuality were considered before their contract was finally agreed. However, research (Adams *et al.*, 2000; Preston and McLafferty, 1999; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, XXXX) revealed that attitudes and practices of local employers limited opportunities for who did not have access to their own form of transport. In some cases employers tended to be wary about taking on young people who made long or complex journeys, even when transport was available.

The participants of both focus groups stated that it was once common for the larger employer located within the Forest to provide transport for their employees. However, given a change in the working patterns; the rise in car ownership which increased the number of people choosing private modes of transport; and a downsizing of companies such provision was no longer feasible. For example one County Council proposed a car sharing scheme and a bus service to the site, but there was insufficient support from employees and the proposal was subsequently axed.

Very few of the young people were aware of public ICT centres available locally (Vince, 2003). Of those who did not have private access many said they would like private access even if it cost more to use (Vince, 2003). This is of contrast to the young people who took part in the focus group study who revealed that they would prefer public transport provision which was cheaper than more expensive private transport provision. The LSC (2002) revealed that 88% of respondents who use the Internet in Gloucestershire do so within their own home; while 56% make use of work facilities and only 7% make use of facilities within educational institutions. It appears that people are more comfortable accessing the Internet at home and do not worry about the cost. The GLMIU (2002) identified that in order for people to participate in learning and training provision centres must be close to home (presumably to reduce travel time), while 6% said they would need more localised courses to increase participation rates. This could suggest why young people are either unaware of the facilities available or are less willing to access public as opposed to private provision.

Vince (2003) revealed a lack of desire by young people for public ICT centres and a lack of awareness of existing provision. A study by the GLMIU (2001: XX) revealed that the most significant barriers to people learning basic skills are perceptual ones ('no need' or 'don't want to') reflecting a lack of demand; while information and other supply side issues are relatively unimportant. In the Forest of Dean Internet access can be secured in a wide range of places. For example: there are two ICT training centres; 2 Internet terminals in post offices; 4 terminals with public buildings (e.g. council offices); 7 online learning centres (in each of the public libraries) and XXX Learndirect centres. Figure X illustrates that these public ICT centres are predominantly found within the larger centres such as Lydney, Coleford, Newent and Cinderford.

A household survey conducted by the GLMIU (2001) of Gloucestershire found that only 14% of people needing information or guidance regarding skill development would go 'unprompted' to libraries, despite many of the public ICT terminals being located there. Similarly there is a relatively high number of Learndirect centres in the Forest, yet the survey revealed that only 15% of people would go 'unprompted' to use these. A high level of young people said that they would be more likely to use internet cafes (Vince, 2003) however there were none located within the Forest. There appears to be inappropriate distribution of terminals which may impair individuals ability from securing access.

While there was evidence of ICT based initiatives were in operation across the Forest, there was neither an awareness of such provision by the young people. A yellow pages search revealed that there were no Internet cafes within the Forest of Dean. Similarly, a study by the GLMIU (2001) revealed that 'the impact of Ufl and Learndirect centres was limited in Gloucestershire. The study went on to reveal that county colleges are the largest providers of ICT learning in Gloucestershire, considered to be beneficial given that they are reasonably spread out. This concern is compounded when respondents to the same survey revealed that they did experience difficulties in finding courses. Of those who did experience difficulties they greatest proportion (16%) found it most difficult to access ICT courses (GLMIU, 2001). While it could be considered that limited provision of Internet terminals in areas where people are likely to go, such as internet cafes and Learndirect centres, could be the sole reason for a lack of participation; it is considered that more often it is the failure to gain information or the lack of available information which acts as a more significant barrier.

One participant suggested placing such provision within places where people naturally congregate including Public Houses and shops. It was envisaged that people would be more likely to use these. In addition it was considered that those who were least likely to have access to personal computers or access them at educational institutions given their disengagement with the system would be most likely to benefit. The GLMIU (2002) identified that 69% of people would most likely go to educational institutions 'unprompted' for advice and guidance. This may be in part due to its association with learning and Job Centres and Career Service advice centres, including Connexions, featured very highly in the ranking. It was identified that participation in learning is inversely proportional to the level of skills or qualifications held by individuals. It was considered by those working with young people, who either did not finish compulsory education or left immediately after, that they would be the most unlikely groups to go into teach establishments to make use of ICT resources.

Studies of access to PC's in the home in the UK reveal that:

> "Initial adopters of a wide variety of new technology are more likely to be young, male, better educated and more affluent, urban and not member of racial or ethnic minority groups than the population as a whole."
>
> (Rodgers, 1995; Norris, 2001)

Internet take up in the South West by 16-24 year olds currently averages at 74% (BRMB, 2003), comparing to 89% of 16-24 year old in England (ONS, 2002). This is set against and average of 55% of all age groups across England (ONS, 2002). Home ownership is proportional to access to the Internet in the home, and as a result is also affected by socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the user. Those who have access to the Internet in the home are more likely to have other technological gadgets including mobile phones and digital television (Oftel, 2000). For those young people in the South West who work more than 30 hours per week 64% use the internet; while 96% of full-time student use the internet; yet

only 49% of those who aren't studying or working make use of the Internet (BMRB, 2003).

Of those who do not access the Internet in the UK, 44% do not because of a lack of interest, 20% lack the skills or confidence, 23% believe they have no need to do so, 25% lack computer access and 7% cannot afford to do so. It is apparent, not just in the South West or the Forest of Dean that it is a lack of awareness and knowledge that prohibits many from taking full advantage of what ICT has to offer. For example, research conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute reveals that only 4% of the population in England lack ready access to a place where they could access the internet. Similarly, few people are aware that those on low incomes are eligible for free basic skills training, and can therefore afford to learn. Despite this there is a great need to promote the benefits of the Internet so that everyone can see that there is a need.

NTO (2002) envisages that within the next 5 years one quarter of all learning will take place electronically. With few public ICT centres within the Forest and less than half of all SME's connected to the Internet and only 41% having PCs available for regular use by staff; it is expected that this will severely disenfranchise those living and working within rural localities, further excluding them.

But more importantly the issue of tackling a lack of skills and confidence is necessary. Generally people are unwilling to admit problems with their basic skills (XXXXXXXXX).   Similarly many are unaware of their deficiencies, and others simply find ways to accommodate their limitations. Therefore it is considered that ICT skills held by those within Gloucestershire are worse than statistics reveal. A study conducted by the GLMIU (2001) revealed that in a self assessment of respondents key skills, ICT skills scored the lowest rating (other skills measured included numeracy, reading and written and spoken communication), although a greater proportion of younger people rated ICT as 'good'. When respondents were asked which skills they feel need to be improved the most 27% of all participants felt that their basic IT skills needed improving, while 24% considered that their advanced IT skills needed improving. The improvement to their IT skills ranked second after job-specific skills. This compliments employers beliefs who report that employees lack basic ICT skills.

Work conducted by Higgins (*et al.,* 2002; XXXXXXXX) reveals 'slow ICT adaptation of rural areas' with evidence indicating that market forces will further strengthen existing patterns of uneven development (Grimes *et al.,* 1994). This has occurred despite the Government undertaking a number of high profile initiatives, such as the Information Society programmes and the 'IT for All' initiative. Research conducted by McQuaid *et al.* (2003: vii) highlighted concerns that 'ICT-based services will not be readily available to the most disadvantaged groups in society, potentially deepening their sense of exclusion'.

Deployment of transport and ICT initiatives in the Forest

The telecentre project, Powys, and project COSMIC, Devon, are both operating well to improve individuals confidence and skills relating to the use of ICT.   While it appears that both of these project could dramatically benefit those living within the Forest both of the focus group studies conducted within the Forest of Dean along with additional research conducted by Vince (2003) reveals a strong preference for improvements to transport provision rather than ICT initiatives. There is a general lack of consideration regarding the opportunities that improved ICT skill development and access can bring to increasing young peoples accessibility to employment and training opportunities.

Participants of both focus groups acknowledged limitations with existing public transport provision within the Forest but there was general support for a scheme similar to the one adopted within Lincolnshire. A similar 'village link' service is currently in operation in a rural district of Gloucestershire. It operates along a core route, deviating off to surrounding areas where requests are made offering additional routes and services at peak times, specifically geared to school runs and workers journeys. This is proving popular in this area and Gloucestershire County Council has recently submitted a bid for funding to implement a similar scheme within the Forest of Dean. The participants of the third focus groups study considered that given the multi-centred nature of the Forest of Dean a more flexible system would be necessary to ensure that the whole of the Forest was covered by the service. This would best be done through a demand responsive service which could ensure that vehicles were only used when necessary.

In line with national and regional planning guidance (PPG6 and Gloucestershire Structure Plan) local planning policies direct development within the existing towns of Cinderford, Coleford and Lydney (FoD, 2000). It is these centres which are served by existing public transport provision making it easier to provide public transport provision.

Despite requests for improvements to public transport services the participants of both focus groups generally supported schemes which provided young people with their own mode of transport, i.e. Jumpstart schemes and bicycle subsidies and car pooling. This was principally because it was acknowledged that given the rurality of the Forest of Dean, the multi-centred nature of the area and the high level of car ownership[6], made it difficult to deliver viable public transport provision. It was considered that while improvements could be made to the existing services by integrating the rail and bus timetables and improving connection times; public transport provision could only go so far. It was considered that while some will use public transport provision, private provision will always be necessary as late night services will never truly be commercially viable and some individuals needs cannot be entirely accommodated using public transport. It was considered that providing young people with mopeds could help to achieve this. It was also considered that it is vital in order to encourage young people to stay within rural communities that

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[6] Only 16% of households in the Forest have no car, less than the level for Gloucestershire (19%) and England (27%) (ONS, 2001).

young peoples social, emotional and economical needs must be met. By providing people with the facilities and services require and desire this can be achieved.

Vince (2003) reveals that young people living in the Forest of Dean preferred the moped scheme out of all the other options presented to them. This was principally because of the relatively low cost associated with them and the perception of personal freedom attached to private modes of transport. Similarly both of the focus groups preferred such an initiative too out of all of the other schemes and initiatives presented to them. Employers, education and training providers and others were keen to see how the current system operating the in the Forest could be extended. The programme currently working in the Forest is entirely reliant on external funding, and given that the initial 'chunk' funding has ceased the project is in trouble. Given the service provider participants own experiences of seeking funding for projects and understanding the benefits that commercial viability brings to projects many suggested the need to charge individuals for the use of the service. It was suggested that a proportion of their wages could collected, to help young people deal with monetary issues as well as to fund the project so it benefits young people in years to come.

Young people desired the provision of their own services and facilities (Vince, 2003). Similarly the coordinators of project COSMIC highlighted that one of the key features of the success of the project is that the service is principally geared towards young people (Vince, 2003a). Participants of the first focus group, with the FoDEBP, highlighted that older age cohorts frequently did not use services when younger age cohorts were using them; acknowledging tensions between users. This view was supported by the participants of the third focus group who revealed that many older people were deterred from using the service given the bad behaviour of young people. It was recognised that this was a contributory factor to why so many people used private transport to access jobs; so that they did not have to travel with young people. Despite the general unwillingness of both groups to share there was a general consensus by the transport service providers that to make services viable, e.g. car pooling, public transport provision and ICT centres. Similarly young people and others who did express a desire for improved transport provision, in the form of lower costs, increased frequency and extension to services that all age cohorts must make use to ensure its viability. However while this is accepted it appears that both age cohorts would prefer pay more for their own private modes of transport and use public transport almost as a second option. For those who are unfortunate not to be able to make such a choice it would appear that the same tensions will remain.

Research by Vince (2003) identified that young people desired both ICT and transport schemes which subsidised users. Similarly Higgins *et al.* (2003: 120) found that 'an initially 'free-service' is usually a necessary feature of ICT learning initiatives in rural areas'. It is considered that this is expected in order to overcome the 'rural premium' whereby the 'delivery of training and business support to rural firms and individuals will most likely incur additional costs compared to more densely populated urban areas (Higgins *et al.*, 2003: 119). However responses

from businesses revealed an unwillingness and inability to financially support the implementation and running of ICT and transport projects.

Vince (2003) identified that young people overwhelmingly desired transport provision as opposed to ICT initiatives. There was little consideration by the young people for the improvement to access of opportunities that could be brought by ICT. In addition young people preferred private transport which facilitated independence at a low cost compared to public transport provision. However young people considered that the relative low cost of public transport which was flexible and offered good coverage is necessary. Young people selected Jumpstart, a demand responsive flexible bus service taxi vouchers and subsidised personal computers as their top three initiatives they would like to see within the Forest.

When conducting the focus groups with both the employers and service providers they acknowledged that all of the schemes outlined could make a significant difference to the quality of life of all residents, particularly young people, each could bring. However, three were selected to be most appropriate for application within the Forest which were: Jumpstart, demand responsive public transport and ICT centres. The three selected were deemed to be most preferable and feasible principally because of the benefits brought, including personal freedom and independence at a low cost to users. In addition, given that these were the initiatives that were preferred by young people which ultimately result in high levels of patronage they were considered more viable. However, there was general agreement that schemes would have to be commercially viable in the longer term and could not be reliant on a continual stream of external funding- given the problems this creates. It was considered that improvements to the existing Jumpstart scheme, as described above, alongside the overall benefits that a viable public transport could bring would be most feasible- particularly given that businesses were so unwilling to provide financial support to any of the schemes proposed.

Regarding the ICT provision service providers highlighted that there already existed a good range of ICT training courses and facilities within the locality. However, it was suggested that perhaps businesses within the county could take part in the Tools for Schools programme whereby the technological capability of schools is boosted by 'providing them with high-quality recycled computers' from businesses (Smithers, 1999). One aspect could be to use locally trained young people to do collection, refurbishment and reselling of the computers. This could improve the skill base for many young people working locally. Similarly the scheme could be extended to provide similar provision for local ICT centres or even discounted for students to have their own personal computers. It was acknowledged that this could potentially cause problems put it could be investigated for potential adoption.

What is clear however is despite there being a general desire for the adoption, and in some case extension of services within the Forest service providers emphasised concern over the adoption of solutions which can only be supported in the short term. It was felt that providing unsustainable solutions was unbeneficial.

Support for the deployment of transport and ICT initiatives

Research by Gatersleben and Uzzell (2003) revealed that 'most organisations believe it is not their responsibility to change staff commuting patterns, with a significant majority believing that it is the Governments responsibility. This supports the findings from the employers participating in first focus group study and questionnaire surveys which revealed a demonstrable unwillingness to finance local initiatives. The reason principally cited is 'oversupply'- given the large pool of labour, particularly in the un/semi skilled jobs, there is no real need for employers to get involved as they can pick who they want. It was also identified that people willingness to access opportunities is used a part of the selection process, whereby those who make considerable efforts are deemed worthy of employment. Employers did however consider that they were sympathetic to needs of their employees.

While employers did not believe it was neither feasible nor desirable for them to provide financial support for their employees, some did recognise that they could play a role in providing an area to promote services and initiatives to their employees. One employer recognised that promoting car sharing schemes[7] and public transport provision could help to relieve problems employers experienced relating to congestion and parking. One transport provider highlighted national schemes which were already operating successfully which did not cost employers. It is apparent that where employers can identify initiatives bringing direct benefits to the company there is a noticeable willingness to promote alternatives to their employees- providing there is no direct cost (in time or money) to the employer.

A survey by IT4all (2001; 17) revealed that 28% of employers believe that 'their employees do not possess the basic IT skills required to meet business objectives'. The failure to train was cited as the main reason, by 47% of employers, for the existence of a skills gap; with smaller companies, those principally found within the Forest of Dean, being less likely to undertake training (e-business, 2001: 6.1). Despite this, employers did not highlight the need for ICT centres or ICT training facilities within the Forest. This may link back to a general unwillingness or inability by SME's in the Forest, but more generally in rural areas, to help improve the skills base of their employees given that large labour pool available in the Forest. E-business (2001: 6.1) identified that that small companies are less likely to undertake staff training programmes and more traditionally recruit staff from competitors to improve the level and quality of skills held by employees.

But the most significant issue was rather the need for additional services, but more a need for an awareness campaign. Young peoples lack of knowledge regarding transport and ICT provision within the Forest was overwhelming (Vince, 2003). Young people did however highlight the need for promotion of existing services; alongside the service providers who acknowledged that this is central to the delivery of any services.

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[7] See details at carshare.com, roadpals.com or shareacar.com

4. Conclusions and implications for implementation

The findings in this paper demonstrate that transport is the most significant barrier to young people living and working in rural areas from accessing employment and training opportunities. Similarly the findings show that where other groups do not have access to private transport they also experience extreme difficulties accessing employment and training opportunities. This lead to time constraints, possibly results in some not being able to work in their ideal job or at a level which they are skilled to do. By providing a reliable public transport service, which can be responsive to individuals needs will ultimately help everyone living within rural areas.

The integration of different programmes into a coherent package at the community level appears to be the most effective way at delivering provision (Higgins *et al.*, 2002; Countryside Agency, 2001).

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