

Connecting Women With the Labour Market in Thurrock

Linda Grant
Christopher Price
Lisa Buckner



Foreword

Over the past three years Thurrock Council has worked in partnership with the Centre for Social Inclusion at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), as one of eleven local authorities taking part in the national **Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets Programme (GELLM)**.

In participating in this project Thurrock Council has made a firm commitment to disseminate and implement the GELLM research findings by engaging with key stakeholders during all stages of the project.

This research study builds on the earlier work of the Council - as set out in the ***Gender Profile of Thurrock's Labour Market (2004)*** – by creating a better understanding of gender equality and the economic benefits of a diverse workforce. As one of Thurrock's largest employers, and as community leaders, we know it makes sense to ensure that both men and women are recognised. Our goal is to become an excellent authority, an employer of choice and to promote employment within Thurrock.

Through active participation in the GELLM research project, Thurrock Council is well prepared for its new legal responsibility for implementing the 'Gender Duty' requirements of the Equality Act 2006 in all key service areas, and seeks to work with local employers to create gender equality throughout the borough.

Christine Paley.

Corporate Director for Community Well-Being

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the following for their help and assistance with the research. We are especially grateful to those who shared their knowledge and experience of labour market conditions and developments in Thurrock and of the circumstances of local women.

Farhat Arif, Thurrock Racial Unity Support Group
Lee Eggleston, South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre
Helen Ford, Jobcentre Plus
Diana Hale, Thurrock Adult Community College
Margaret Long, Thurrock Council
Vera Markos, Thurrock Council
Jacqui Payne, Ngage
Debra Buck, Ngage
Maureen Wilcox, Thurrock Council

We would also like to extend a special thank you to all the women who gave up their time to take part in the focus group discussions in Thurrock, for sharing with us their experiences and thoughts about working and living in Thurrock, and for speaking so openly about their lives. The information they provided has been invaluable to this research. To ensure anonymity we cannot name them individually. We hope this report captures some of the key issues of importance to them.

Members of the GELLM Team contributed as follows:

Statistical Analysis	Lisa Buckner; Gerard Poole
Interviews and Focus Groups	Linda Grant; Bernadette Stiell; Christopher Price
Report drafting	Linda Grant; Lisa Buckner; Sue Yeandle

All Crown Copyright material is reproduced with the permission of HMSO.

Contents

Key findings	2
Introduction	3
Women outside paid work: a neglected group	3
Policy responses to build bridges to work for local women	4
Policy context	4
Women’s circumstances in Aveley and Uplands, Grays Riverside, and West Thurrock and South Stifford in Thurrock	5
Women’s employment	6
Women’s unemployment and economic inactivity	7
Changes in the labour market	9
Women outside paid work	9
Organisational views	9
Local women's views and experiences	10
Local employment projects	16
Building successful employment projects for women: recommendations	18
Tackling issues in the wider labour market: recommendations	20
Conclusion	21
References	22
Appendices	
A1 Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets	23
A2 Research methods	24
A3 Ward profile for Aveley and Uplands, Grays Riverside, and West Thurrock and South Stifford in Thurrock	25

Key findings

This study has explored the situation of unemployed and economically inactive women in Thurrock, and the scope for developing projects which would assist local women who are not in paid employment in the transition to paid work. Women's circumstances in the Aveley and Uplands, Grays Riverside, and West Thurrock and South Stifford wards were examined in depth.

Women's circumstances in the three wards

Although the study found that a significant proportion of economically inactive women want to work, compared with women in England as a whole, in these three wards:

- Working age women were more likely to be in paid employment, except in West Thurrock and South Stifford
- A much smaller proportion of women worked part-time
- Women workers were less likely to work in skilled, managerial and professional jobs
- Many women worked considerable distances from home
- Working age women were as likely to be economically inactive or unemployed, except in West Thurrock and South Stifford where they were more likely to be without paid work
- Female unemployment was high across all age groups
- High percentages of working age women were claiming Income Support, especially in Grays Riverside
- A high proportion of unemployed and economically inactive women had last worked in sales and customer service jobs
- A high proportion of women had no qualifications
- Lone mothers were more likely to be economically inactive

Women outside paid work

Local organisations emphasised the following as barriers to employment for local women:

- Lack of skills and qualifications
- Limited labour market aspirations
- Lack of speaking skills in the English language
- A complex mix of personal problems
- Lack of well paid job opportunities
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of flexible working opportunities
- Lack of affordable childcare
- Low pay
- Poor public transport services

Local women emphasised the following in their discussions about the labour market:

- Their desire to work
- The importance of paid work for self esteem and as an example to children
- The difficulty of acquiring up-to-date qualifications and recent work experience
- The difficulty in presenting their skills and abilities to employers
- The poor availability of jobs with flexible and school hours
- The negative impact of absences from work on their skills and confidence
- The importance of support, guidance and practical help to aid the transition to work
- The importance of opportunities for well-paid work

Building successful employment projects for women: recommendations

Successful employment projects will:

- Understand and respond to the circumstances of women's lives
- Understand the differences between women
- Target projects on women
- Provide job-focused training
- Make education and training more accessible to women returners
- Provide women with personal support, guidance and practical help
- Offer women a wide range of employment services
- Reach out to women in the places they go to day to day
- Secure employer support and engagement
- Establish partnerships of local employers willing to support the employment aspirations of economically inactive women
- Encourage employers to 'take a risk' and employ local women
- Understand changing needs in the labour market and the skills needed for new jobs

Wider policy changes are also needed, including:

- Developing a strategic approach to the changing local labour market and to economic inactivity in the borough
- Allocating local strategic responsibility for raising local levels of employment
- Tackling low pay, in partnership with local employers
- Encouraging employers to offer more flexible working opportunities
- Providing affordable, good quality childcare
- A review of ESOL training provision

Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the potential for establishing projects, based in Thurrock, which would assist women in the transition from unemployment or unpaid family work into paid employment.

For some women outside paid work, especially those living in deprived neighbourhoods, the transition into paid work can be a complex journey, fraught with difficulties and setbacks. Other work has shown that for some groups of people it may be necessary to develop new and innovative policy and programmes to support the step into paid work and to increase people's employability in the future (Schmid 1998; Fagan and Rubery 1996).

Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) projects provide one model for such an approach. These are employment projects which seek to build a bridge to work by providing participants with paid work on a temporary basis, together with focused training, support for personal development, and assistance with job search (Marshall and Macfarlane 2000). This study was designed to explore interest in developing ILM-type projects focused on women amongst the statutory and voluntary sector locally. It also explored the views and experiences of local women who are outside paid employment.

The research was undertaken between July 2005 and March 2006, using a variety of methods: statistical analysis of ward level data; interviews with key people with knowledge of the local labour market; interviews with people with an understanding of the circumstances of local women; and focus groups with local women who were not in paid employment. The research was focused on the Aveley and Uplands, Grays Riverside, and West Thurrock and South Stifford wards in Camden.

This study is one of six local research studies carried out within the GELLM research programme. Parallel studies on *Connecting women with the labour market* have also been undertaken in: Birmingham; Camden; Sandwell, and Wakefield. A synthesis report, giving the findings for all five areas, is also available (Grant et al 2006). The *Gender Profile of Thurrock's Labour Market* (Buckner et al 2004) provides the district-wide statistical context for this study.

Women outside paid work: a neglected group

There are high percentages of women of working age who are outside paid employment, whether we consider England as a whole, Thurrock, or the specific wards which are the focus of this study. In England, 1 in every 3 women of working age is outside paid employment. In Thurrock as a whole, and in Aveley and Uplands, and in Grays Riverside the proportion of women outside employment is similar to that in England. In West Thurrock and South Stifford the proportion is higher – by about 6%, with 38% of working age women outside paid employment.

There are many reasons for this, often to do with women's roles as mothers and as carers, and the choices they make at particular points in their lives. But not all women of working age who are outside paid employment have chosen to be out of paid work, and many are not happy with their current circumstances. Some of these women have been made redundant, some have been looking for work but find they do not have the right skills or experience to secure a job, and some have experienced discrimination because of where they live or because of their ethnicity, sex or age. Others have found work, but struggled to stay in work. All of these groups of women are the focus of this study; they are women who want to work but who, for a range of reasons, are not working.

In many ways this group of women has been neglected, both in terms of the understanding of their lives, and in terms of policy. The widespread assumption that women outside paid employment are largely content not to work is not supported by evidence. In 2004, 23% of economically inactive women in England, a total of 903,400 women, wanted paid work¹. In addition, 4.4% of women were unemployed, a further 472,000 women. In Thurrock, 27% of economically inactive women wanted paid work, and with the district's unemployment rate in 2004 at 4%, this means there were 4,200 women in Thurrock who wanted paid work. Thus, thousands of women outside paid employment would like to work - but very little is known about their experiences, their aspirations and the circumstances of their lives.

¹ ONS, Annual Population Survey, December 2004 – March 2005, Crown Copyright.

Policy responses to build bridges to work for local women

Policy responses which build bridges to work for local women are important because of the very scale of unemployment and economic inactivity amongst women of working age in the localities being studied.

They are also important because women can face specific barriers in accessing paid employment. These may arise from: women's absences from the labour market related to caring and other family responsibilities; the quality of local jobs; poor access to transport; and gender discrimination. Women from ethnic minority groups may face additional obstacles in the labour market, including race discrimination (Reid 2002; Willson 2003). Women who have migrated to Britain may be restricted by a lack of familiarity with the British labour market, lack of fluency in the English language, limited knowledge of British training and educational systems, and difficulty in securing recognition for qualifications gained overseas.

Despite these specific and formidable barriers to work facing women, there are few national programmes and policies specifically focused on women. The key national programmes are *The New Deal for Lone Parents* (NDLP) and the *New Deal for Partners of the Unemployed* (NDPU), but many economically inactive women who want to work do not fit these categories. Indeed, only women with some connection to the benefit system would be drawn into these programmes. Many women outside paid employment do not have this link with the benefit system, and thus lack a connection with organisations such as Jobcentre Plus.

In some localities, voluntary sector organisations have developed with a specific focus on women who are out of work. Such projects are often an invaluable support to local women but, by virtue of their voluntary nature, they are usually small scale projects, with insecure funding.

We emphasise the importance of 'the local' as the context in which people can best be supported in their engagement with work for several reasons. Central government policy and regulations may be insufficient to bring about effective and sustainable transitions into paid work for some groups of people, and there can be unique circumstances in specific localities. Instead, it is

important to delegate 'more decision making power to individuals and local agencies in order to adjust to individual needs and local circumstances' (Schmid 1998).

Policy Context

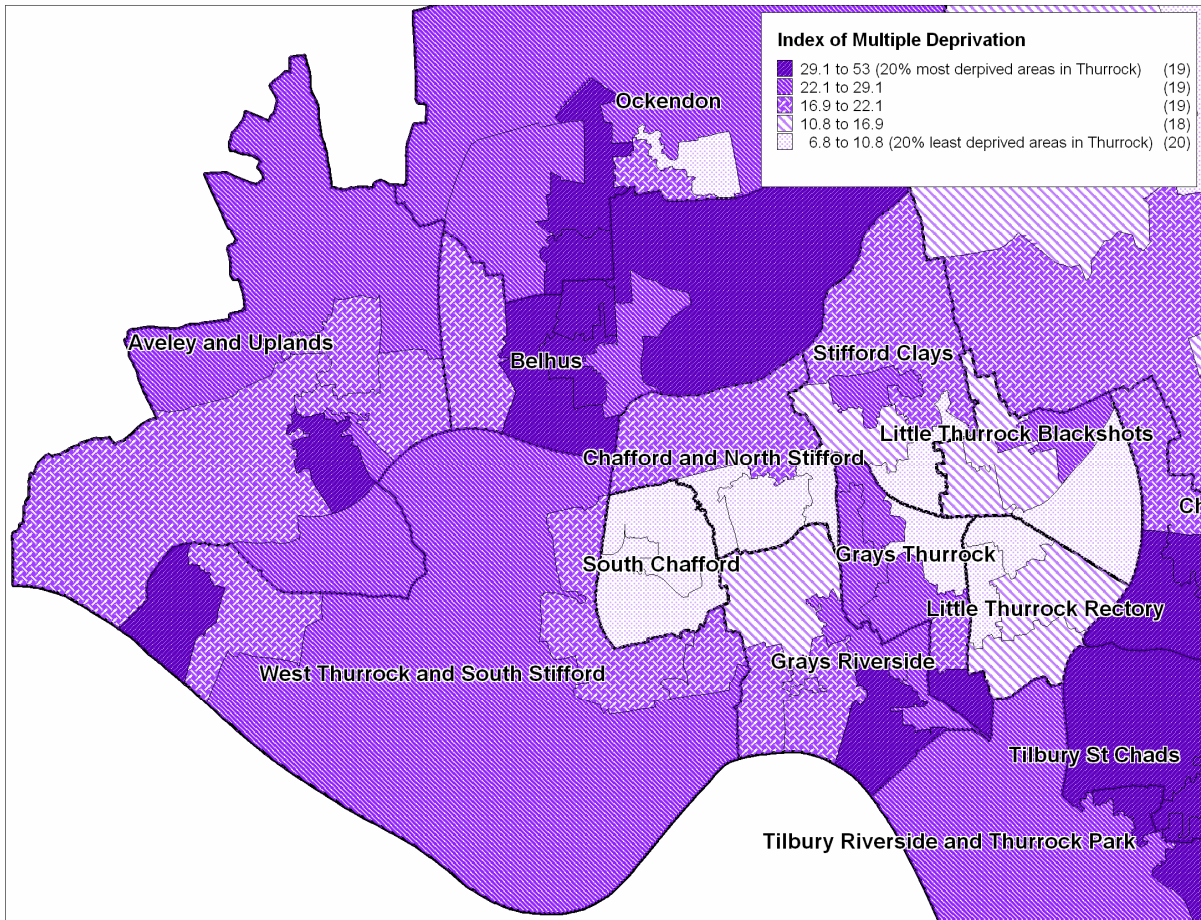
The New Labour Government regards paid employment as the best route out of poverty, and since 1997 has reshaped tax, benefit and employment policy with the aim of transferring people from welfare into work. Key policy developments include: the New Deal programmes, which provide different amounts of support and compulsion to join the labour market; the introduction of Tax Credits for low paid earners with children, as incentives to enter paid work; and the introduction of the National Minimum Wage (NMW).

Despite significant employment growth, the government acknowledges that pockets of worklessness persist in certain localities; developing new ways of addressing worklessness has thus become a key focus of government policy (DWP 2000; HM Treasury 2000; HM Treasury 2002; DWP 2004; DWP 2006). These developments engage not only central government but also local authorities and their partners, in some localities through Local Strategic Partnerships. It is recognised that deprivation is often highly concentrated in neighbourhoods, and requires tailored approaches to providing services and work incentives. Government and local authorities are also committed to closing the gap between average employment rates and the employment rates of disadvantaged groups and those living in deprived neighbourhoods where unemployment and economic inactivity are high (HM Treasury 2004). The overall target is to achieve an employment rate of 60% for women in the European Union by 2010 (EU 2004). In the UK the government has set a target of an 80% employment rate overall.

To achieve the study objectives, we have:

- Examined the changing nature of the Thurrock labour market
- Explored the circumstances and aspirations of working age women in Thurrock who are not in paid employment
- Gathered information about existing employment projects and labour market developments in Thurrock

Figure 1 Pattern of deprivation: Aveley and Uplands, Grays Riverside, and West Thurrock and South Stifford wards 2004



Source: ODPM, Crown Copyright 2004, 2001 Census Super Output Areas, Crown Copyright 2004. This work is based on data provided through EDINA UKBORDERS with the support of the ESRC and JISC and uses boundary material which is Copyright of the Crown.

On the basis of this new analysis, at the end of this report we offer recommendations on employment projects which might assist women outside paid employment in the transition to paid work.

Women’ circumstances in Aveley and Uplands, Grays Riverside, and West Thurrock and South Stifford wards in Thurrock²

Parts of the wards of Aveley and Uplands, Grays Riverside, and West Thurrock and South Stifford include some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Thurrock. They are located to

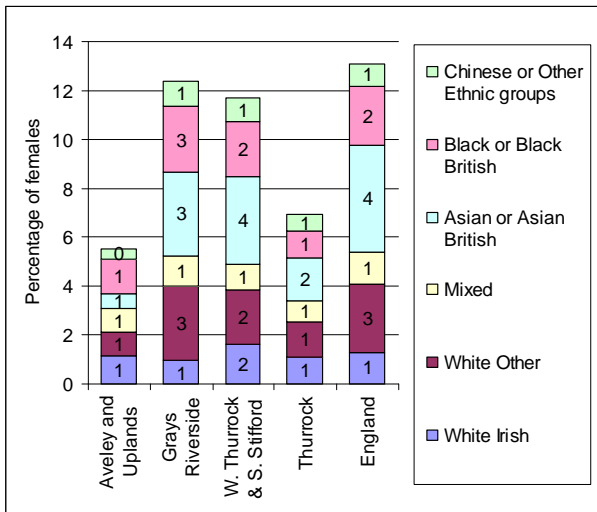
the south west of Thurrock, bordering on Havering (Figure 1).

The population in these wards was relatively young in 2001, compared with Thurrock and England as a whole. 25% of the population in West Thurrock and South Stifford were aged 0-15, compared with 22% in Thurrock and just 18% in England. In Grays Riverside, 46% of the population were aged 25-49 compared with just 37% in Thurrock and only 35% in England, whilst only 7% were aged 65 or over, compared with 13% in Thurrock and 17% in England.

A relatively high proportion of the population in Gray’s Riverside and West Thurrock and South Stifford ward are from ethnic minority groups compared with Thurrock (Figure 2).

² The data presented in this and the following sections is from the 2001 Census Standard Tables unless otherwise indicated.

Figure 2 Ethnicity in Aveley and Uplands, Grays Riverside, and West Thurrock and South Stifford



Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003.

Health indicators for the wards show a high proportion of women of working age in these wards have a limiting long-term illness (LLTI): around 12-13% in the three wards, compared with 12% of women in Thurrock and 8% in England.

Women’s employment

A high proportion of women of working age in the wards are in paid employment. In Aveley and Uplands and Grays Riverside 67% of women of working age were in employment, compared with 67% in Thurrock and 64% in England. However, in West Thurrock and South Stifford only 58% were in paid employment. Nevertheless, employment rates for women in all three wards were above or close to the 60% employment rate target.

Levels of part-time working amongst women in two of the wards - West Thurrock and South Stifford and Grays Riverside - were low. Yet many women who want to combine caring with paid employment prefer to work part-time or in jobs with flexible working patterns. In West Thurrock and South Stifford only 14% of women of working age were part-time employees and in Gray Riverside only 19% of working age women were part-time employees, compared with 25% in Aveley and Uplands and in Thurrock, and 23% nationally.

Part-time working amongst lone mothers in these wards was also at a low level. In Grays Riverside, and in West Thurrock and South Stifford, just

19% of lone mothers worked part-time and in Aveley and Uplands just 20%, compared with 24% in Thurrock and 26% in England as a whole.

Looking across the three wards, there was variation in terms of the occupational level of women who were in work. Compared with the national picture, women who were in work in West Thurrock and South Stifford were more likely to be in low skilled jobs, while in Grays Riverside they were less likely to be in low skilled jobs. In Aveley and Uplands the proportion of employed women in these jobs was the same as in England as a whole.

This variation across the wards in relation to the occupational level of working women is also apparent at the higher end of the occupational structure. But compared with the national picture, in all three wards working women were less likely to be in jobs as managers, senior officials and professionals than women nationally. For example, in Aveley and Uplands just 15% of women were in these higher levels jobs, compared with 19% in Grays Riverside, 17% in West Thurrock and South Stifford and 21% in England.

The industrial sectors in which women worked also varied across the wards. One third of women workers in Aveley and Uplands, and 29% in Grays Riverside worked in wholesale, retail, hotels and restaurants, compared with just 24% in England as a whole. In Grays Riverside just 12% of women worked in health and social work, compared with 19% nationally. A high proportion of women in the three wards were working in the finance and real estate sector.

Many women workers in parts of the locality worked considerable distances from their home. 26% of women workers in Aveley and Uplands and 31% in West Thurrock and South Stifford travelled more than 5km to work, well above the national figure of 19%. In contrast, 75% of women in Grays Riverside worked within 5km of home, compared with 73% in Thurrock and 81% in England as a whole.

Figure 3 Main occupations and industries of women in employment

	Aveley & Uplands	Grays Riverside	West Thurrock & South Stifford	Thurrock	England
Occupation					
Managers, senior officials	10	12	13	10	11
Professionals	5	7	4	6	10
Associate professionals & technical occupations	8	13	7	11	14
Process, plant and machine operatives	2	2	3	2	3
Elementary occupations	13	10	15	12	12
Industrial sector					
Manufacturing	7	7	6	7	9
Wholesale, retail, hotels and restaurants	33	29	18	30	24
Finance and real estate	20	24	21	21	18
Education	10	8	15	10	12
Health and social work	14	12	20	14	19

Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

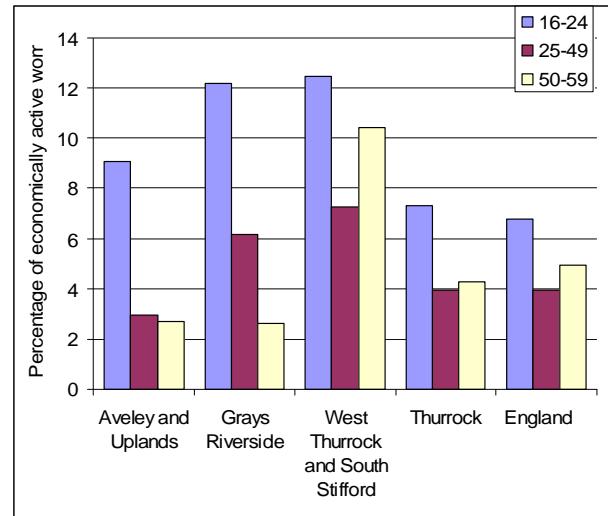
The differences in the distances that women in the locality travel to work is reflected in the way they travel. In Grays Riverside, a high proportion of women workers walked to work (17%, compared with 10% in Thurrock and 13% nationally). In contrast, 11% of women in Aveley and Uplands, 15% in Grays Riverside and 18% in West Thurrock and South Stifford take the train, compared with 14% in Thurrock and just 4% in England.

Women's unemployment and economic inactivity

A high percentage of working age women in West Thurrock and South Stifford were either economically inactive or unemployed in 2001. In this ward 38% of working age women were either economically inactive or unemployed. In Aveley and Uplands and Grays Riverside the figures were 31-32%, similar to the figure for Thurrock (31%) and England as a whole (33%). In these three wards this represents over 3,000 women who were either economically inactive or unemployed.

Levels of unemployment amongst women were high in the three wards across all age groups (Figure 4). The level of unemployment was very high for young women in Grays Riverside and in West Thurrock and South Stifford, at around 12%, compared with 7% in both Thurrock and England. The level of unemployment was also high for women aged 50+ in West Thurrock and South Stifford, at over 10%, compared with Thurrock (4%) and England as whole (5%).

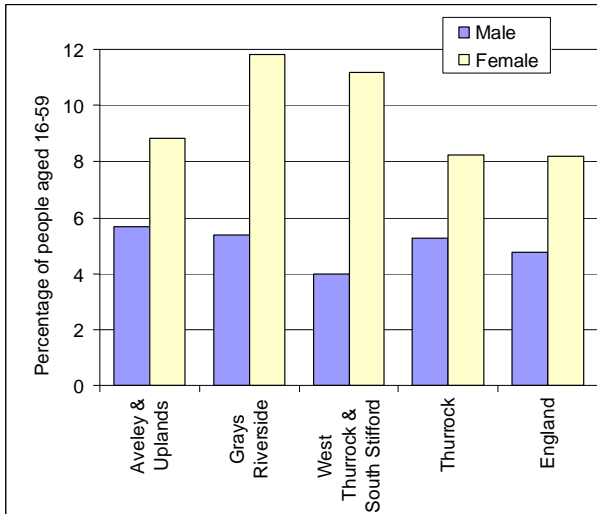
Figure 4 Unemployment rates for women by age



Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

The percentage of working age women claiming Income Support is also higher in the three wards than in Thurrock and England as a whole. 12% of women of working age in Grays Riverside, 11% in West Thurrock and South Stifford, and 9% in Aveley and Uplands claim Income Support (Figure 5). This represents over 880 women in the three wards.

Figure 5 Income Support claimants



Source: DWP August 2003 and 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

Against the national trend, between 1991 and 2001, the proportion of women of working age who were economically inactive increased slightly in West Thurrock and South Stifford (from 32% to 33%). In the other two wards the changes followed the national trend. In Aveley and Uplands the proportion of women of working age who were economically inactive decreased from 34% to 28%, and in Gray Riverside there was also a decrease from 28% to 26%, compared with a decrease in Thurrock (from 33% to 27%) and in England (from 32% to 29%)³.

In line with national trends, the proportion of women who were unemployed in Aveley and Uplands fell from 8% to 4%, similar to the trend in Thurrock, where female unemployment fell from 6% to 4%, and in England (7% to 4%)⁴. In Grays Riverside, and West Thurrock and South Stifford, the unemployment rates remained static between 1991 and 2001 at 8%.

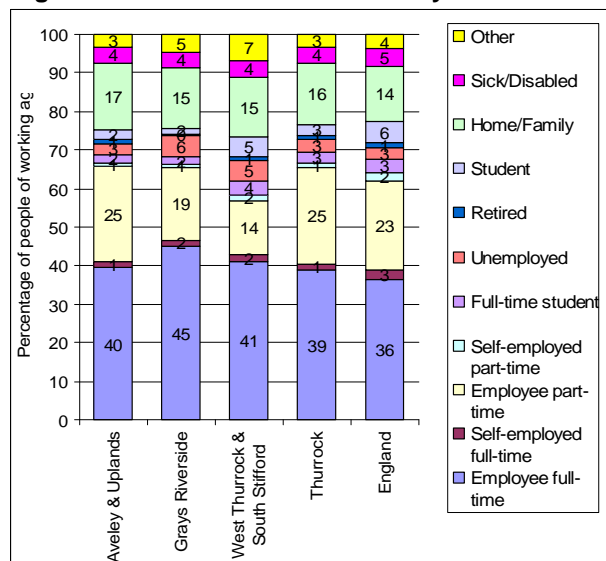
A quarter of unemployed or economically inactive women in the three wards had last worked in sales and customer services, compared with 17% in England as a whole (Figure A9). There were also quite high percentages of unemployed women in two of the wards (Aveley and Uplands and Grays Riverside) who had last worked in administrative and secretarial work. In West Thurrock and South Stifford 30% of unemployed and economically inactive women had last worked in elementary jobs or as process, plant

³ Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003, 1991 Census LBS, Crown Copyright 1993.

and machine operatives, compared with 24% in Aveley and Uplands, 19% in Grays Riverside, 21% in Thurrock, and 26% nationally.

With the exception of women in Aveley and Uplands, the proportion of working age women looking after their home and family full-time was similar to the proportion in England as a whole (Figure 6). In Aveley and Uplands 17% of working age women were looking after their home and family full-time, compared with 15% in Grays Riverside and West Thurrock and South Stifford, 16% in Thurrock, and just 14% in England as a whole.

Figure 6 Women's economic activity status



Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

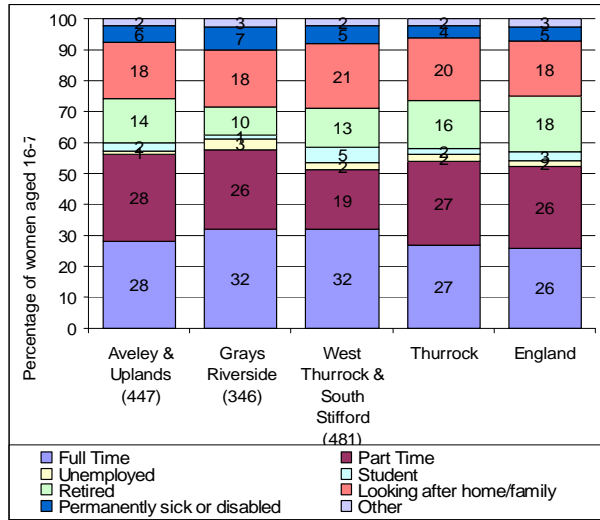
Compared with the national picture, a high proportion of women in these three wards have no qualifications (Figure A8). This applies across all age groups. For some age groups, in some of the wards, there is a significant difference from the national picture. This difference is most marked in Aveley and Uplands where 20% of women aged 16-24 have no qualifications (compared with just 16% in England), 38% of 35-49 year old women have no qualifications (compared with 26% in England), and almost three quarters of women aged 50+ have no qualifications (compared with one half in England).

A high proportion of women without qualifications are not in paid work (Figure A8). Only 37% of women with no qualifications in West Thurrock and South Stifford were in employment, compared with 50% in England as a whole.

However, women with degree level qualifications were as likely, if not more likely, to be in employment in these wards. In Aveley and Uplands 85% of women with degree level qualifications were in employment, compared with 79% in Grays Riverside, 82% in West Thurrock and South Stifford, and 79% nationally.

In the three wards women who have caring responsibilities were as likely, and in some wards more likely, to be in paid employment as similar women in Thurrock or nationally (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Economic activity and provision of unpaid care by women aged 16-74



Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

Lone mothers in these wards were much more likely to be economically inactive than lone mothers in England. 54% of lone mothers in Grays Riverside, 52% in Aveley and Uplands, and 51% in West Thurrock and South Stifford were economically inactive, compared with 48% in Thurrock and 46% England.

Changes in the labour market

The three wards focused on here, and Thurrock as a whole, have experienced significant changes in industrial structure and job opportunities over the past 30 years. These changes have had important outcomes for women.

Buckner et al (2004) showed that in Thurrock between 1991 and 2002 the overriding feature in terms of employment was one of job growth. Growing numbers of women in Thurrock have found work in the retail sector, in hotels and restaurants, and in public administration, education and health. A large proportion of the new jobs have been part-time, but there has been much stronger growth in both women's full-time and part-time employment in Thurrock than nationally.

Yet despite job growth, levels of economic inactivity and unemployment amongst women have remained relatively high in some parts of Thurrock and for some age groups. Clearly some women have found that they cannot engage easily with the newly developing local labour market. The rest of this report is concerned with these women: women who have been made redundant; women who have never worked but who want to work; and women who have taken a break from work and now want to return, but who are finding returning to paid work a difficult process.

Women outside paid work

Organisational views

To build a picture of local women who are currently not working we talked to representatives of voluntary and statutory organisations who provide training programmes and support to women. Their perception of local women is important, as it can shape local policy responses. These organisational representatives identified the following key barriers facing local women:

Local organisations were aware of some local women's limited skills and qualifications, already highlighted in our statistical evidence. Organisations also felt that some local women lacked aspirations, whatever their level of skill.

We need to raise women's expectations, raise their sights, because they don't consider they can do anything, especially young women.

Young girls leaving school, what they are aspiring to is getting a job in retail at Lakeside, and that is a terrible shame because the people in that employment are not looking to climb any more ladders really.

This was worrying because even when girls achieved good results at school they were not always taking up further education.

It seems that girls achieve well at school but they don't go on to further education. I think that's because of the lack of career choices that are here...there is no option but for the girls to go into, say, shop work.

There was also a concern that women's lack of confidence in their ability had become somewhat embedded in the local culture.

There is a feeling amongst a lot of head teachers and employers that Thurrock people are basically thick, and we know they are not. But often local people have convinced themselves of this. After years of low achievement in schools in Thurrock people are only just picking themselves up.

The importance of the differences in women's circumstances was also emphasised. For example, some women from ethnic minority groups lacked skills in English speaking and this undermined their confidence in the labour market and limited their opportunities.

Often they can write English, and they can read it, because in Asia English is a compulsory subject, but speaking it is very difficult...If they learn English they are more confident...but if there was no language barrier they wouldn't do jobs like cleaning and stacking shelves.

And people who are recent migrants face particular difficulties in accessing jobs.

People are coming here from all over the world and being a newcomer it is very difficult to get a job. Wherever they go they are asked, 'Have you got any experience?' And if they haven't worked anywhere, where can they get experience from? So they are not getting jobs. I am meeting cases like that every day.

Some women from ethnic minority groups had worked in local factories for 20 or 30 years yet their spoken English remained quite poor. In the jobs they had done in the past good skills in

English had not been a requirement. But as these factories have closed and these women workers have been made redundant, they have found that their lack of English is a real barrier in the labour market, despite their desire to work

They didn't need communication skills in those jobs...they were sheltered, in a way. But those manufacturing jobs are declining and then they face really difficulties.

In those neighbourhoods where unemployment levels were high the problem of low aspirations was felt to be particularly acute, although with support, women's aspirations can begin to change.

Sometimes people aren't interested in what's going on until you open their eyes. It's as if they are walking round with blinkers on. As soon as they are introduced to this new world and start seeing things differently then they can develop...so I suppose it's a bit of everything – skills, knowledge, opportunities and information.

Yet others may be highly qualified but still unable to get a job because of a language barrier.

If somebody has a Masters in their own language back home. If they can't speak English they can't work, no matter how high a degree they have.

There was also a concern that the circumstances of some women meant that there were many aspects of their lives which would need to be addressed in order for them to engage successfully with the labour market.

You've got people with low skills and poor communication skills but also the inability to cope with life's normal difficulties...people with lots of social problems.

On the other hand, there were women who did have qualifications and skills but who were unable to find jobs which would use these skills.

I mean, what opportunities are there for women? There's only shops and distribution centres...so a lot of women end up getting into retail work or packing in warehouses.

The majority of women are forced to take jobs that are not the jobs they are trained for or want to do because of their commitments to their family...So they work in call centres and things like that.

Indeed, organisations were concerned to point out the ways in which the structure of the local labour market and the provision of services had a

significant impact on women's ability to take up paid work.

One factor was the lack of opportunities for flexible working. Thus although part-time jobs were available, the working patterns available were often not suitable for some women with children.

One of the new shops offered a shift from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday to Friday, and that was very popular with women. But most offer something like 2 day shifts from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and then two evening shifts from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. That shift pattern is not very easy for women with children, especially if you don't have your own transport, because there is no bus home at 10.30 p.m.

One woman was sitting next to a poster that said that that firm promoted child friendly policies, but every time she approached them to change her working hours they said 'no'

All of the organisations pointed to the difficulties created for women because of poor public transport services.

Public transport isn't very good at all. It is certainly something that needs to be addressed. If you live in Aveley and you don't have your own transport you are stuck there. For people who have higher aspirations it's difficult for them to break out.

One of the key things for the areas you're looking at is the appalling lack of transport. It's a very small borough, but when you're in one of these areas you're just trapped. It is very difficult to come into the centre. It's a very poor bus service and it just means that women become even more isolated.

As is widely recognised, the limited availability of affordable childcare is an important barrier to women in the labour market and this was also a concern to some local organisations. This was highlighted in our earlier report (Buckner et al 2004), which showed that some areas of Thurrock have no day nursery provision.

Finally, local organisations felt that the combination of low pay in the local jobs available to the women living in the three wards, and the workings of the benefit system, left women trapped outside the labour market.

If the government would allow people to gradually return to work and come off benefits in some transitional way it would help. But the benefit system at the moment doesn't support that, and there is a point where it's just not worth being at work financially if you've got children...you have to have a

huge leap to a good job to be able to pay for childcare...it is very hard for women to work their way out of being on benefits.

When you work out that you can earn more in receipt of benefits than you can working in employment, then that is a barrier. It isn't because women don't want to work.

Everyone wants to pay nothing more than the minimum wage. The wages in Thurrock are very low.

At the same time, persuading women of the benefits of training for more skilled and higher paid work was difficult if low paid work was accessible to them:

Getting training is something difficult, time-consuming and it's about spending money rather than getting money. People prefer to do a job, they don't realise the reward for getting training.

Local women's views and experiences

All of the issues referred to in the interviews with representatives of local organisations emerged also in the discussions with women. However, our discussions with women helped to deepen our understanding of the circumstances of local women and their relationship to the labour market.

The women who took part in the discussions were mostly of White British ethnic origin, other women were of African, African Caribbean and Nepalese origin. The views and experiences of other groups of women might add further dimensions to these findings.

The discussions with women uncovered the high value many local women place on paid work, but also the ways in which the transition to paid work can be a process fraught with difficulties and setbacks. The discussions also revealed the kinds of organisational and personal support women wanted and needed to successfully enter paid work.

We met with two groups of women: one group of women aged between 16 and 24 and another group of women aged between 25 and 49. Some similar themes emerged across the age groups, but there were differences also. We therefore set out here the views of the two groups separately.

Women aged 25-49

Many of the women who took part in the focus group discussions had had paid employment in the past. Thus experience of paid employment was common. But most women lacked recent work experience. Some women had worked in low paid jobs in the retail and education sectors but others had held jobs in office administration, nursing and at management level in the past.

There were mixed views amongst the group on the value placed on paid work and on the conflicting demands of motherhood and paid work. One view was that since having children, paid work was of less importance than caring for the family.

Your whole outlook on life changes after you have a family. Work isn't the be-all and end-all when you've got kids.

However, others regarded being out of work as largely a negative experience.

Your pride and independence suffers because you are always having to ask your partner for money.

Women spoke of their low self esteem, loss of confidence and boredom because of a lack of interaction with other people. Some women were depressed because they were out of work.

I got very bored and depressed. It took a couple of years before I pulled myself together and started doing voluntary work. That really helped, to have a useful role in life other than wife and mother.

And being out of work often meant it was hard to make ends meet.

My mum lives around the corner, so she helps out financially because she's in full-time work. They give me money, they buy the kids shoes.

My husband does two jobs now. We survive – just.

Overall, although there was some ambivalence about the conflicting demands of paid work and responsibilities at home, the majority of the women are women who want to work and who were actively looking for work.

Yet despite the desire to work, the process of looking for work was often a fairly depressing experience. Two of the key barriers were the lack of relevant qualifications and lack of recent experience.

A lot of the time you've got the skills, or a lot more common sense than the qualification, but you still need to have that qualification before they'll look at you.

Teaching Assistants and crèche workers never needed qualifications before. A lot of good people can't get jobs now because they don't have the qualifications. Mums used to do these jobs, now you need Level 3, plus an extra year's experience.

Trying to improve qualifications was sometimes expensive and required considerable personal resources and time, but without qualifications women felt very disadvantaged. Moreover, the qualifications required for the jobs women desired were constantly changing. Having qualifications which were currently recognised was the key.

I don't feel I've got enough qualifications to get a job. I was a nurse for 20 years but now my skills and qualifications aren't recognised anymore.

Qualifications go out of date so quickly. If you're out of work you've had it. You're not up to date anymore.

Leaving work for a period of time also had an impact on women's confidence and thus the very process of applying for jobs was experienced as quite daunting.

I think it takes years to get back to where you were after you have a child. You lose yourself a bit.

I am petrified by interviews. It's daunting. When I last did an interview it was a chat with one person. Now it's a whole panel. It's terrifying. That's another skill you need.

There's so many people going for that one job. Your confidence goes. It's scary. Only a little mistake and you've failed.

For those women whose first language was not English they felt the key barrier facing them in the labour market was their language skills. The interpreter explained:

They are looking for practical work, like cleaning, working in a supermarket, where they don't need language so much. They would also like to work in schools but they don't think their language skills are adequate. They are sensible people. If they are told what to do, they can do it.

Because women often lacked up-to-date qualifications and experience, the jobs market they faced was limited. Many local jobs paid the minimum wage or only a little more.

Because rates are so low if you work in childcare, making sure you're better off than on benefits is quite hard. So even in a childcare career you still have to juggle your hours and costs.

Some women claiming benefits felt that the low pay associated with local jobs made the transition to work extremely difficult or impossible.

It is quite hard just to put your foot on that ladder – it's the hours mainly and the rates of pay.

It's actually impossible coming off benefits and into work...I've sat and calculated it, and it's quite frustrating. You're trying to move forward, but you're stepping back.

Others felt they lacked accurate information about how their financial circumstances would change if they took paid work.

Nothing's clear. It's like trying to learn a different language. No-one actually tells you how much you need to earn before you lose everything.

Many of the women were disappointed by the limited availability of jobs with school hours or flexible hours of work. These women argued that school hours employment would offer them an opportunity to combine work and childcare, a situation that was desirable.

I scouted local papers every week but found many of them wanted longer hours, which I can't do. I wanted school hours.

I am finding it quite hard to find the right hours to fit around a three year old, so I've been looking into setting up a business doing childcare at home.

I'm looking for part-time work but, the same as everyone else, it's the hours you can work. So even experience doesn't count for everything. You can't just go and get a job anywhere because of the hours you're restricted to.

The problem I have with Lakeside is that even though they shut at 10 p.m. I really can't start work until 7 p.m. because of when my other half gets in from work. They have part-time evening shifts that start at 5 or 6 o'clock. So it doesn't matter if I've got 15 years experience, if I can't start at 5 o'clock, then tough.

And just being mothers, they felt, put them at a disadvantage in the labour market.

Employers discriminate against mums. They'd rather employ someone who's not a mum. They think you'll go off if your little one is ill.

The availability of local jobs was important to most of the women. Although many of the women had worked in London in the past, since they had had their children they would no longer consider this. There were two issues, one was not being too far away from children during the day, but also, as most of the women wanted flexible, part-time hours of work, the travel costs made a trip to London for a part-time job uneconomic.

I used to work in Stratford, East London, 20 miles away. But there's a difference between how far you want to travel when it's full-time and part-time. If you're part-time you don't want to travel that far from home.

But there can be problems even accessing jobs in Thurrock because of poor public transport services.

Lots of buses round here go all round the houses. So even if there is a direct link, the journey might take a long time...There's the stress of waiting for a bus that never turns up.

There was an acceptance amongst the group that there were jobs available locally. But an important issue was that women wanted to do the kinds of jobs they were interested in, not simply any job. Many of the available jobs were seen as low paid and not worthy of their skills, labour market experience or aspirations.

I flip through the local papers every week and I'm open to anything, but you want to get back into what you know.

You need to stay happy, You need to do things you want to do. I left that job because I was unhappy and I wanted to do other things. I don't want to step backwards into what I did 10 years ago.

Women aged 16-24

Most of the young women wanted to find work but, as with older women, their search had been disappointing.

I'm trained in childcare but I've sent CVs and had interviews but I get absolutely nothing back. They don't even write to you.

Some young women felt that lack of experience stood in their way of getting work.

I need to get a job 'cos my fork lift licence is gonna run out, so at least if I have a job they can give me a company licence. I can't get a job because you

need 2 years experience and I've only got a year and a half, so it's hard no matter what I apply for.

Everyone wants experience. But then where do you go to get the experience? And if you go on a college course that still doesn't count as experience.

Others felt that an important barrier was that they were under 18.

I'm looking for anything. They say it's easier to get work after you turn 18.

Some jobs say you've got to be over 21, with experience.

The process of looking for jobs unsuccessfully was taking its toll on some of the women.

If you ain't got a lot of confidence and you've been for interviews and you get knocked back, it does affect you. You just feel like giving up.

But having paid work was regarded as important, particularly for those young women with children, who wanted to set an example and provide for their children.

My partner's family were against me going out to work. They said, 'Oh no, you can't do that, you've got two kids.' And that's made me even more determined to prove them wrong. When the kids are older I want to have something for myself and I want to do it for them. I want to make things better for my kids.

I'd love to go back to administration, cos I've learnt how to use computers...I know they are skills worth having in the future and I could pass them on to her (daughter).

However, the low pay typically associated with the kinds of jobs they might secure locally was a key issue. The young women felt that the very poor levels of pay on offer to them as young women was exploitative and not worthy of their abilities.

My last job didn't pay me £5.05, they paid me £4.50, even though I am 22. They were paying me below the minimum wage. I complained about it so many times and they said there was nothing they can do about it. I said, 'No, that's the law', so I left in the end.

I was working for £60 a week and it was hard work. I had to bike there every day because I didn't live close by and no buses go there. I ended up running the place for £60 a week.

The low pay available in local jobs for young women created real dilemmas for those with children, as they sought to assess the financial benefits of taking work.

You can work under 16 hours and you can still claim but they take off your benefits, so it's not worth it. If you work full-time you pay more in childcare, so that's not worth it either

And finding affordable childcare in the context of low pay was also very difficult.

I have looked into it. But you're working and paying your money straight out again to nurseries and you'll have everything else to pay for too.

I'd rather go out to work and have my own money, but childcare – it's like expensive. By the time your travel and childcare costs come out, you're not left with much.

Women also wanted to feel confident that the childcare available was of a good quality.

I've got a lot of childminders near me, but I'm a bit dubious. You don't want to leave your kids with just anyone, especially in my area.

Some of the young women appeared to have quite limited horizons in relation to the labour market. Most were looking for work in the retail industry or in childcare. Others were willing to consider 'anything' and some wanted clerical jobs.

Most of the women were looking for work in Grays. Some had worked in London in the past but now wanted work closer to home. The desire to work close to home was often because of childcare or other caring responsibilities.

There's loads of jobs going up in London and obviously the money is really good, but obviously there's the travelling.

The jobs available locally were not always regarded as particularly attractive, however:

There's nothing really in Grays, apart from the High Street, so you've got to look out further. But there's nothing much worth doing. They're all boring jobs. They're not stimulating. You want jobs where you can get something out of it.

As a result some were seeking to improve their skills and seek more qualified work.

I need to get back to college. I don't want to get to the stage where I can't be bothered and leave another dead end job. I know that being a paramedic would be something I would enjoy. So I'd rather put all my efforts into doing the coursework and training for a better job.

In the meantime, being out of work was a depressing experience for these young women.

Personally I've been suffering from depression ever since having the children because of not working. I feel like the world is spinning round and I'm watching everyone else go round and I'm stuck still, really out of it. That's why I am so desperate to get back in, I want to go back to work.

Many had to rely on parents for financial support but the lack of independence was felt sharply and it was a struggle to make ends meet.

For food shopping you end up going to the cheap shops but it's all rubbish food and then you get ill on it.

You get into debt, into arrears. I owe a grand for emergency stuff, like a winter coat and stuff like that.

Yet despite their efforts to find work those with children felt that they received conflicting messages about their position in the labour market.

You can't win. They say kids are better off with their mums at home, but they say you should work as well. You need the money to buy them stuff, but if you leave them with someone else you're being a bad parent. You can't win.

Finding a way through this conflict was difficult.

You don't want to miss out on them (children) or for them to feel neglected or anything like that. But you also want to work at the same time, so you're stuck in the middle. I want to work part-time so I can do both, but it is still a challenge.

Using employment services

We asked both groups of women about their experiences of using employment and job brokerage services. Some women had looked for help in making the transition to work. But women's experience of using job search or brokerage services was not always positive. Women were particularly critical when agencies simply point to job vacancies, but offer no further support.

The Job Centre website was rubbish. I put in 'Grays', then saw some good jobs come up. Then I saw those jobs were in Scotland; pages and pages of jobs, but none in this area, so I've given up on that now.

What they wanted was more practical help in finding work. Those that had been allocated a Lone Parent Advisor at the Job Centre were more positive about the service because of the more practical and individual help and advice provided.

They did everything to get me back to work and it worked really well. I stayed in that job until the company went bust. But I've got two children. So I've not jumped back in again because it's more complicated now.

Some found the Job Centre phone service helpful but others were critical because of the narrow range of jobs on offer.

The only jobs seem to be cleaning, care jobs, retail jobs. Some employers advertise elsewhere so you need to trawl wider.

Some of the older group of women felt they didn't receive sufficient information about how their benefits would be affected by taking up work. And overall they felt that the practical help they were looking for was not available and that thus the only way to get a job was through word of mouth.

People knowing you personally, that's what really matters, not going to the Job Centre.

The young women were more disappointed with the employment services available to them. Many felt that services were overstretched and unable to give them sufficient attention.

They're so busy in there. There aren't enough staff in there to see everyone. You have to make an appointment and sometimes come back the next day to be seen. Just to see someone to talk about a job you might be interested in.

It's murder just getting near the desk to make an appointment.

The Connexions service for young people, whilst viewed as helpful, was also criticised for having a limited list of job vacancies, which were often out of date.

Some of the young single parents had used a service called Wishes, which they felt had provided good, useful information.

They've been really helpful. They're a good organisation to help young mums. They specialise in people with young children that want to go back to work...I did a skills test and they told me I'll need a degree for the job I want to do.

Both groups of women would welcome more support in engaging with the labour market and services based on the range of issues facing them. They wanted support founded on an understanding of them as women in the labour market, or as women bringing up children alone. This meant that they needed advice on benefits and practical help and guidance on how to re-enter the labour market. But there was a view that there were very few places to go for help in finding jobs, preparing for interviews and drafting CVs.

Thus many local women who are outside paid work want to work, and many local women place a high value on paid work, both for their own self-esteem and enjoyment of life, and as an example for their children.

But the transition to paid work is a process requiring considerable support, guidance and practical help. Women would welcome greater support to help them update and extend their labour market skills, experience and qualifications. Some of the employment services used by local women have not fully addressed their needs in the labour market.

Low pay is also a significant barrier to the labour market and the perceived lack of jobs with flexible working hours affects local women's opportunities to secure employment.

Local employment projects

There are a range of local projects and organisations which are helping local people into paid employment. Here we outline the kinds of approaches taken by some of these projects and organisations.

Some local organisations provide short training courses or sessions in skills such as IT, English, childcare, sewing and textiles, cooking and exercise. Some of these are run as taster sessions or short courses and are usually not linked to a specific job or the requirements of a specific employer. Women join these courses through their contact with community organisations such as *Thurrock Racial Unity*

Support Group. Sessions are provided free of charge.

The aim of sessions such as these is to bring women from a range of ethnic origins together, build women's confidence and encourage them to appreciate their skills and potential. In turn, women can be guided towards higher level, more focused training. However, this can be a long process.

Five women from my group have gone to Community College already, so after spending two years with me and building confidence they have joined. This is what my aim is. They are going for further education.

Similarly the *Thurrock Learning Partnership* has developed community-based classes, run in local primary schools and other community venues which help to re-connect adults with learning. Again these short courses, run by *Thurrock Adult Community College*, are seen as a stepping stone; a basis from which to encourage adults to take up further education. The partnership links together a range of local educational and training organisations.

It's about getting adults back into learning, to raise the quality of their basic skills, their employment skills and there is childcare while they are doing the training project...It also gives people the opportunity to do work-based courses in particular areas of their choice.

There is also a local programme called *New Directions for Women*, which offers support and careers guidance to women returners and help for women in writing their CVs.

The *Thurrock ACE Partnership* runs courses for adults in the skills needed to support and run voluntary and community organisations. Involvement with the voluntary sector and the opportunity to attend free courses and learn skills associated with volunteering can indirectly help women returners to re-build their confidence and subsequently engage with the labour market.

Another innovative and highly praised local project is the *Thurrock Community Mothers Parent Support Programme*. The programme involves:

The recruitment and training of ..mothers from disadvantaged areas to promote community health and the development of early parenting skills within their own communities.

The 'community mums', as they are known locally, both deliver health services in their communities but are also supported in their own personal development and learning. The project is a Thurrock PCT initiative and operates in partnership with *Thurrock Adult Community College*.

In our discussions with representatives of local organisations there were many positive comments about local classes and courses, but there were also some concerns and critical comments, on the effectiveness of local approaches to the problems of unemployment and economic inactivity. There was also a concern to emphasise good practice. We outline here some of these perspectives.

One concern was that despite the range of centres and organisations providing training courses, it was possible for people to take one course after another but without taking the step into work.

There was also some concern that training courses lacked a clear focus on the contemporary and changing labour market and employer needs. Many organisations offered short courses in a variety of skills, but these did not always prepare people to apply for specific jobs or for expanding areas of employment. Instead, the key was to get employers on board so that training was linked to the requirements of real jobs. It would be important in the future to understand the developing labour market and to prepare people for new areas of employment.

We need to understand how the labour market might change, what job vacancies will be coming up and what skills and training will be needed to fill them.

I think we owe it to the women of Thurrock to make sure when there is this huge growth of jobs they are best placed to get them, rather than people being imported in to do them or people commuting in from London. We need to make sure women reach their potential.

At the same time, there were some concerns that the current housing developments were not linked to a plan for the development of new job opportunities.

What we are seeing as a community is thousands of houses being thrown up, but no new opportunities for jobs going with them. So we are not sure whether the people in the new

communities are going to be working in London or locally.

The worst case scenario is if they build loads of warehouses and loads of houses and that's it...we need the type of opportunities that bring wealth into the borough.

The importance of ensuring that courses succeed in raising people's confidence sufficiently for them to enter work was also raised. In some communities people's confidence was at a very low level and a lot of intensive work was necessary for people to recognise their potential. But this kind of support was labour intensive and expensive and thus required appropriate levels of funding.

Some people required a considerable amount of personal support to prepare for applying for jobs and to overcome the barriers to work. It was therefore crucially important that funders supported projects on a long term basis. But there were often difficulties in securing long term funding:

There's a view that – oh, two years funding, that's enough to turn it around...and I think, 'What planet are you on?' Its generational, so you are not going to turn things round quickly. That's why we need much longer-term funding.

Although there were a number of projects which supported unemployed and economically inactive women, there was a view that more could be done to support local women. One important step would be to become much clearer about what women want.

It's finding out what women want. We tend to say, 'We'll put this on for you', and then we don't get anyone to attend.

But there was also a need to understand the range of services that women might need.

If you want to encourage more women into work you need to look at the needs of those women, what sort of support do they require financially, educationally, we need a more holistic approach rather than - we'll have a bit of this and a bit of that.

And often very practical help was essential.

It isn't that women don't want to work, but they often need help with writing CVs, how you present at interviews, filling out application forms. We've even lent women clothes to wear to an interview. It's all those kinds of things.

There can also be problems with childcare. Training centres and projects often offer free childcare but once women move into a real job the childcare support is withdrawn. This makes it crucial to review childcare provision locally – its cost and availability, and whether local women feel confident about using it.

Whatever the scope and value of local projects, there was a concern that often local people who were unemployed or economically inactive were not making use of them. For this reason it was important to continue to reach out to people in the places they have contact with, like local schools and health centres as a means to draw them into using services.

To be successful you have to build up from the community. If you've got a whole range of small community groups engaged that's your first step.

And then it's important to provide practical support, one to one support:

I think it is best to take people to the Job Centre, to show them the way, how to look at the computer, tell them about the jobs.

You need to offer a lot of tender loving care, hand holding. It's about building up people's confidence and building self-esteem.

There was, then, a range of views about the detailed approach to employment projects. But there were also concerns about the wider context in which employment projects developed.

One of the most critical underlying issues raised in our interviews with organisational representatives concerned the importance of determining who has the responsibility for the strategic overview and delivery of a local employment strategy to address the needs of the changing local labour market. Although there was considerable economic development locally, without the clear allocation of responsibility for labour market issues there was a concern that funding opportunities for employment programmes would be overlooked and local people would not benefit.

There was also a concern that whilst there were good projects there was scope for a more co-ordinated approach, linked to an overall strategy. Most importantly, there was a need to allocate responsibility for addressing unemployment and economic inactivity in the locality.

And although some important work had been done locally, there was further scope to do more to break down the traditional division of labour whereby girls and boys enter distinct areas of employment.

Thurrock is particularly bad on that. I have to say the roles are so traditional, there hasn't been a lot of moving forward, but we have been trying to raise awareness on this.

Building successful employment projects: recommendations

This research has been concerned to understand how best to support women who want to work into paid work.

Our interviews with local women and our examination of the statistical data show that there are many local women who want to work. Local women place a high value on paid work, both in terms of their own lives and those of their children. However, there are some significant barriers to be overcome in order to fulfil women's desire to work.

The research has also explored whether the model provided by Intermediate Labour Market-type employment projects would be appropriate to help local women in their transition to work and whether it would appeal to them. We have also considered whether there are other measures that might assist local women into work.

Based on our research, we set out below some of the key principles that we regard as essential aspects of employment projects if women from deprived communities are to make the transition into paid work. We also make some recommendations regarding the wider policy context.

The key starting point is to accept that many women who are not currently working want to work. To assist their transition to paid work it is important to understand the features of women's lives that can prevent them from engaging in paid work.

Women in their 30s and 40s who have taken long absences from work lack up-to-date skills and experience of the labour market. They also lack confidence in their value as potential workers. This makes it difficult for individual women to

make the transition to work without support, practical help and guidance.

Younger women, in their teens and 20s, can also lack experience of work and in deprived communities they do not always have the qualifications and confidence to engage successfully with the labour market. As a result, they often set their horizons in terms of work at a low level.

Many women of all ages have children, and they are searching for ways to combine caring for their children with paid work. Yet the jobs available to them are often very low paid and this takes childcare costs beyond their reach, even if they qualify for Childcare Tax Credit.

Successful projects will need to accept and respond to these aspects of women's lives.

Some existing projects are helping local women to access employment, but more could be done to make a real difference in the employment rates for local women. Here we set out some of the key elements that should be incorporated into employment projects.

Targeting projects on women

As we argue above, women face a distinct set of issues in relation to the labour market. Successful projects for women should be informed by an understanding of women's lives, as well as the differences between women in terms of age and ethnicity. For this reason it is important to develop projects targeted on women.

Providing job-focused training

Although many women outside paid employment engage with training courses offered in their communities, often these courses do not equip women with the skills essential for specific jobs.

Job-focused training, developed in collaboration with employers, and geared to specific job vacancies, can prepare women for successful job interviews.

Making education and training accessible

Women who are trying to find work often lack either up-to-date qualifications or sufficient qualifications. Yet women returners' access to free courses leading to qualifications appears to be limited. Women also lack knowledge about the courses open to them.

Women returners need financial support to access education leading to qualifications. There also needs to be a well-signposted and single point of access where women can receive comprehensive information on course provision.

Providing support, guidance and practical help

Many women who want to make the transition into work will find it difficult without support. Simply providing women with lists of vacancies is often not enough. We need to understand women's situation, re-build the confidence lost, and offer guidance and practical help so that women can extend their horizons. Mentors may be helpful and supportive.

Employment projects should offer personal support to women, guide them into the labour market and, in some situations, use mentors to help build their confidence and aspirations.

Offering a range of services

Employment projects should aim to provide a range of services to women. Women may have different needs, from training needs, to help with building confidence, interview techniques, filling out forms and preparing CVs.

Employment projects should be funded so that they can provide a wide range of services tailored to women's needs.

Reaching out to women

To connect women with available services it will be important to make contact with them in the places they visit day to day. We can make contact with women in schools, and in other community-based venues. If we are to tackle high levels of worklessness amongst women, and help women who want to work in the transition to work, it will not be enough to wait for women to make contact with employment services.

Employment projects must reach out to women.

Getting employers on board

There are a range of community-based projects which offer training courses in skills such as IT, sewing and volunteering skills. However, courses can be disconnected from real jobs, and the skills and qualifications needed for them, and thus are not sufficient, in themselves, to ensure women get jobs. For this reason, employment projects need a link to employers and employer support.

Getting employers involved with employment projects means that training and qualifications can be geared to specific jobs with specific employers. This will enable training to be linked not only to job requirements in the current labour market, but also to those jobs which will develop in the future labour market. This will put women in a much stronger position to gain employment.

Encouraging employers to 'take a risk'

If employers are to commit themselves to employment projects for women they have to be persuaded to take a risk. The potential recruits may be different from the kinds of people who normally apply for their jobs, and they may take time to re-adjust to the rhythms and demands of paid work. But for many employers, being prepared to take on the kinds of women who have taken part in this research can be a genuine advantage. In many jobs a knowledge and understanding of local communities is a real asset, and for many employers achieving a more diverse workforce is an unachieved goal.

Understanding the changing labour market and identifying appropriate jobs

Successful employment projects are based on an understanding of real labour market conditions and the changing jobs market. Links with employers are vital, along with an understanding of which types of jobs are expanding and may appeal to local women.

Employment projects must understand their local labour market and combine this knowledge with an appreciation of the interests of women.

Engaging partnerships of local employers

Women are interested in a range of job opportunities. Some of the women interviewed were interested in para-professional jobs in health, care and education. Others had different employment aspirations. The way forward may be to establish partnerships of local employers, with a particular emphasis on the public sector, willing to liaise with training providers and willing to offer suitable local women new opportunities for job interviews.

The partnership approach could be developed with the help of a project co-ordinator who would also ensure trainees receive personal support and guidance.

Tackling issues in the wider labour market: recommendations

Alongside our recommendations with respect to employment projects, we also recommend a fresh look at the wider labour market context and the policy approach to it.

A strategic approach

Some key local stakeholders emphasised the vital importance of a strategic overview and of allocating responsibility for raising local employment levels and ensuring local people are equipped with the skills and knowledge to engage with the changing labour market.

At present there are a range of employment projects, alongside statutory employment services for people claiming working age benefits. Regardless of the effectiveness of these projects and services, it is important that they are located within a wider employment strategy which seeks to elevate employment levels and engage all working age people locally, including those women who are not claiming benefits who want to work. There is a view that local authorities could assume this strategic responsibility, within the context of a wider partnership.

Tackling low pay

A key barrier to work for women is the low pay associated with many of the jobs in which women typically engage. At present, tax credits do not always raise income levels sufficiently to prevent low pay being a barrier to employment, particularly for lone mothers.

We know from one of our other studies (Grant et al 2005) that many employers increase pay in line with their competitors, year on year. Employers are reluctant to break out of these pay norms. Nevertheless, the problems created by low pay will need to be addressed if worklessness is to be comprehensively tackled.

There may be a role for local authorities to address this issue with local employers as they engage with them as partners in a local employment strategy.

At the national level, a more generous minimum wage and an increased value for tax credits would also be beneficial.

Extending flexible working opportunities

The availability of flexible work is limited in Thurrock. As long as this situation persists, many women will find it difficult to engage with the labour market.

The local authority could work with its employer partners to emphasise the importance of increasing the availability of flexible working for the prosperity of the local economy and of local people.

Review childcare provision

Existing childcare can be too expensive for low paid women - and local women are not always confident about the quality of the care provided. Childcare must be affordable, and local women need to be reassured that their children will receive the highest quality care and attention. Unless they have this assurance, they will not be confident to use the services provided.

Local authorities could review the availability and affordability of childcare services and research local women's views and experience of using it.

Raising young women's aspirations and opportunities

Young women sometimes set themselves low horizons in the labour market, and they can lack knowledge of the full range of jobs that might be open to them. Some women complain that employment services are not listening when they express their real choices in the labour market. Because of this they are often drawn into, or forced into, some of the lowest paid jobs in the labour market, as these are jobs typically held by women.

Schools should seek to extend girls' labour market horizons, and encourage girls to pursue careers in a much wider range of jobs. Employment services should ensure that they listen to women's choices.

Better access to work-focused ESOL

An important barrier facing some local women is a lack of fluency in the English language. Yet English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses do not always succeed in raising language skills amongst all the women who want to work.

Part of the problem is the frequency of courses. Often classes take place only once a week, and more can be forgotten in the intervening week than learnt. The content of courses can be also

more about dealing with everyday situations, such as shopping and going to the post office, rather than with the demands and requirements of paid work.

The local authority could review the scope and frequency of language courses, and encourage greater provision of job-focused ESOL courses.

Conclusions

This study has considered how to connect women who are outside paid employment, and who want to work, with the labour market. The research has shown that many local women have a strong desire to work. They regard paid work as important for their standard of living and quality of life, essential for their self-esteem, and an example to children. Yet local women face difficulties in acquiring up-to-date qualifications and work experience, and they sometimes lack confidence about paid work, especially after long absences from the labour market, even when they hold qualifications or have work experience.

Much could be done to enable local women to connect with the labour market, but employment programmes must be based on an understanding of the diverse circumstances of women's lives, and should reach out to women. Successful projects will provide women with job-focused experience and training, and secure the engagement of employers. Women also need personal support and guidance as they make the transition to work. Employers must be encouraged to take a risk.

Women are searching for a range of jobs. Some of the women expressed an interest in jobs such as classroom assistants, but others wanted higher paid work and more flexible working patterns. It will be important, however, to ensure that projects focus on areas of employment in which there will be real jobs in the future for which local women can apply. The involvement and commitment of employers in the development of projects is vital if women are to secure real jobs in the future.

Finally, tackling women's unemployment and economic inactivity must be integrated within a wider local employment strategy, aimed at raising levels of skill and employment in the local labour market.

References

- Buckner, L., Tang, T. and Yeandle, S. (2004) *Gender Profile of Thurrock's Labour Market*, Sheffield: Centre for Social Inclusion, Sheffield Hallam University.
- DWP (2000) *Jobs for All*, Report of the Policy Action Team on Jobs, London: Department for Work and Pensions.
- DWP (2004) *Building on New Deal: local solutions meeting individual need*, London: Department for Work and Pensions.
- DWP (2006) *A New Deal for Welfare: Empowering People to Work* London: Department for Work and Pensions, Cmnd 6730.
- Fagan, C. and Rubery, J.(1996) 'Transitions between family formation and paid employment', in G. Schmid, J. O'Reilly, and K Schomann (eds.) *International Handbook of Labour Market Policy and Evaluations*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Grant, L., Price, C. and Buckner, L. (2006) *Connecting women with the labour market*, Sheffield: Centre for Social Inclusion, Sheffield Hallam University.
- Grant L., Yeandle, S. and Buckner, L. (2005) *Working below potential: women and part-time work*, Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.
- Grant, L., Yeandle, S. and Buckner, L (2006) (new edition) *Working below potential: women and part-time work*, Sheffield: Centre for Social Inclusion, Sheffield Hallam University.
- HM Treasury (2000) *The Goal of Full Employment: opportunity for all throughout Britain*, London: HM Treasury.
- HM Treasury (2002) *Opportunity and Security for All: investing in an enterprising, fairer Britain*, London: HM Treasury.
- HM Treasury (2004) *Stability, Security and Opportunity for All: investing in Britain's long-term future*, London: HM Treasury.
- EU (2004) *Facing the Challenge: the Lisbon strategy for growth and employment*. Report from the High Level Group chaired by Wim Kok, November 2004.
- Marshall, B. and Macfarlane, R. (2000) *The Intermediate Labour Market: a tool for tackling long-term unemployment*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Reid, L. (2002) 'Occupational segregation, human capital and motherhood: black women's higher exit rates from full-time employment', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 5 pp.728-747.
- Schmid, G. (1998) *Transitional Labour Markets: a new European employment strategy*, Discussion Paper FS1 98-206, Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung.
- Willson, A. E. (2003) 'Race and women's income trajectories: employment, marriage and income security over the life course', *Social Problems*, Vol. 50, No. 1, pp. 87-110.

Appendix 1 Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets

The *Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets* project was funded, between September 2003 and August 2006, by a core European Social Fund grant to Professor Sue Yeandle and her research team at the *Centre for Social Inclusion*, Sheffield Hallam University. The award was made from within ESF Policy Field 5 Measure 2, 'Gender and Discrimination in Employment'. The grant was supplemented with additional funds and resources provided by a range of partner agencies, notably the Equal Opportunities Commission, the TUC, and 12 English local authorities.

The GELLM project output comprises:

- new statistical analysis of district-level labour market data, led by Dr Lisa Buckner, producing separate **Gender Profiles** of the local labour markets of each of the participating local authorities (Buckner, Tang and Yeandle 2004, 2005, 2006) - available from the local authorities concerned and at www.shu.ac.uk/research/csi
- 6 **Local Research Studies**, each involving between three and six of the project's local authority partners. Locality and Synthesis reports of these studies, published spring-summer 2006 are available at www.shu.ac.uk/research/csi. Details of other publications and presentations relating to the GELLM programme are also posted on this website.
 1. *Working below potential: women and part-time work*, led by Dr Linda Grant and part-funded by the EOC (first published by the EOC in 2005)
 2. *Connecting women with the labour market*, led by Dr Linda Grant
 3. *Ethnic minority women and access to the labour market*, led by Bernadette Stiell
 4. *Women's career development in the local authority sector in England* led by Dr Cinnamon Bennett
 5. *Addressing women's poverty: local labour market initiatives* led by Karen Escott
 6. *Local challenges in meeting demand for domiciliary care* led from autumn 2005 by Professor Sue Yeandle and prior to this by Anu Suokas

The GELLM Team

Led by Professor Sue Yeandle, the members of the GELLM research team at the *Centre for Social Inclusion* are: Dr Cinnamon Bennett, Dr Lisa Buckner, Ian Chesters (administrator), Karen Escott, Dr Linda Grant, Christopher Price, Lucy Shipton, Bernadette Stiell, Anu Suokas (until autumn 2005), and Dr Ning Tang. The team is grateful to Dr Pamela Fisher for her contribution to the project in 2004, and for the continuing advice and support of Dr Chris Gardiner.

The GELLM Partnership

The national partners supporting the GELLM project are the Equal Opportunities Commission and the TUC. The project's 12 local authority partners are: Birmingham City Council, the London Borough of Camden, East Staffordshire Borough Council, Leicester City Council, Newcastle City Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Somerset County Council, the London Borough of Southwark, Thurrock Council, Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council, Wakefield Metropolitan District Council and West Sussex County Council. The North East Coalition of Employers has also provided financial resources via Newcastle City Council. The team is grateful for the support of these agencies, without which the project could not have been developed. The GELLM project engaged Professor Damian Grimshaw, Professor Ed Fieldhouse (both of Manchester University) and Professor Irene Hardill (Nottingham Trent University), as external academic advisers to the project team, and thanks them for their valuable advice and support.

Appendix 2 Research methods

This research was conducted in 2005-6 using a variety of methods, including: analysis of statistical data, including the 2001 Census; interviews with key informants with knowledge of the circumstances of local women's lives, local employment projects and the local labour market; and two focus groups with local women.

The interviews with key informants explored: the activities and priorities of their organisation; local social and economic conditions; the nature of the local labour market for men and women; the social and economic circumstances of local unemployed and economically inactive women and men; local services; local employment projects; and views about, and experience of, the Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) model.

The focus groups with women covered the following topics: work history; experience of looking for work; labour market support and advice; reasons for not working; views about not working; aspirations in relation to paid work; views about the ILM model.

Two focus groups with local women were held;

- 13 women participated in the group aged 25-49. Their characteristics were as follows:
 - 2 were aged 25 - 30; 6 were aged 31-25; 2 were aged 36-40; 2 were aged 40+; 1 did not state her age
 - 11 of the women were living with their partner or husband, 1 was living alone; 1 did not provide details of her living arrangements
 - 12 had dependent children, with family size ranging from families with 3 children to families with 1 child
 - 2 were caring regularly for an elderly or sick relative
 - 9 of the women described themselves as White British; 3 as Nepalese.
 - All of the women had worked in the past
 - 9 were currently looking for work
 - 11 of the women had qualifications: 1 was educated to A level; 8 were educated to GCSE level; 1 had an NNEB qualification, 1 had an NVQ Level 3

- 12 women participated in the group aged 16 - 24. Their characteristics were as follows:
 - 6 of the women were aged 16 – 19; 6 were aged 20 – 24
 - 1 was living with her partner or husband; 7 were living alone or in a hostel; 2 were living with parents, 2 were living with friends
 - 5 women had dependent children, 4 had 1 child; 1 had 2 children
 - 1 was caring regularly for an elderly or sick relative
 - 10 of the women described themselves as White British; 1 as African and one as Mixed White and Caribbean
 - 10 of the women had worked in the past
 - 8 were currently looking for work
 - 7 of the women had formal qualifications: 4 were educated to GCSE level; 1 to A Level; and 2 to NVQ Level 2/3

Appendix A3 Ward profile for Aveley and Uplands, Grays Riverside and West Thurrock and South Stifford in Thurrock

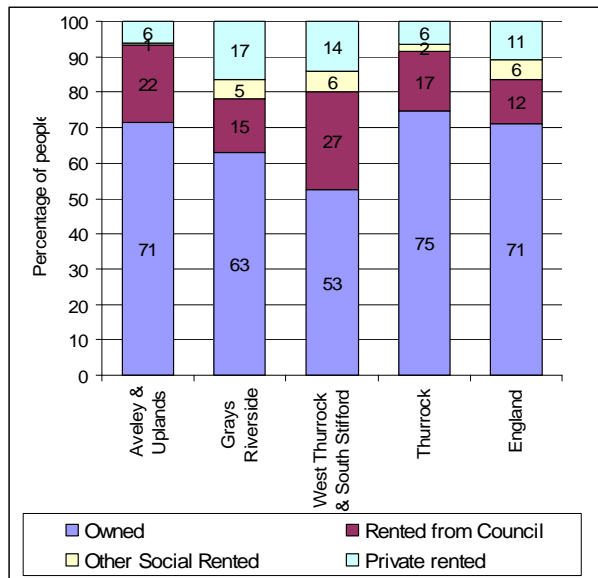
General information

Figure A1 Population profile – proportion of people in each age group *per cent*

	Aveley and Uplands	Grays Riverside	West Thurrock and South Stifford	Thurrock	England
All males (numbers)	4,080	4,650	3,850	69,670	23,922,144
0-15	22	23	26	23	19
16-24	10	10	11	11	13
25-49	38	48	45	38	36
50-64	17	12	12	17	18
65-74	7	4	4	6	8
75+	6	2	2	4	6
All females (numbers)	4,298	4,680	3,946	73,459	25,216,687
0-15	19	22	24	21	18
16-24	10	14	14	11	12
25-49	37	45	43	37	35
50-64	15	11	10	16	17
65-74	9	4	4	7	9
75+	10	4	4	8	9

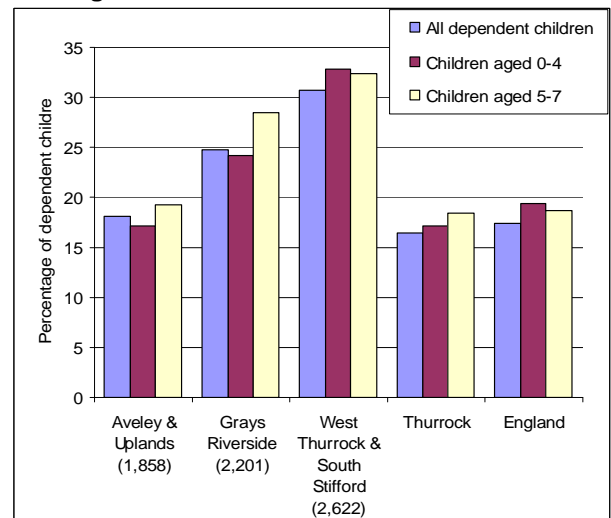
Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

Figure A2 Tenure



Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

Figure A3 Dependent children in families with no working adults



Source: 2001 Census Standard Theme Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

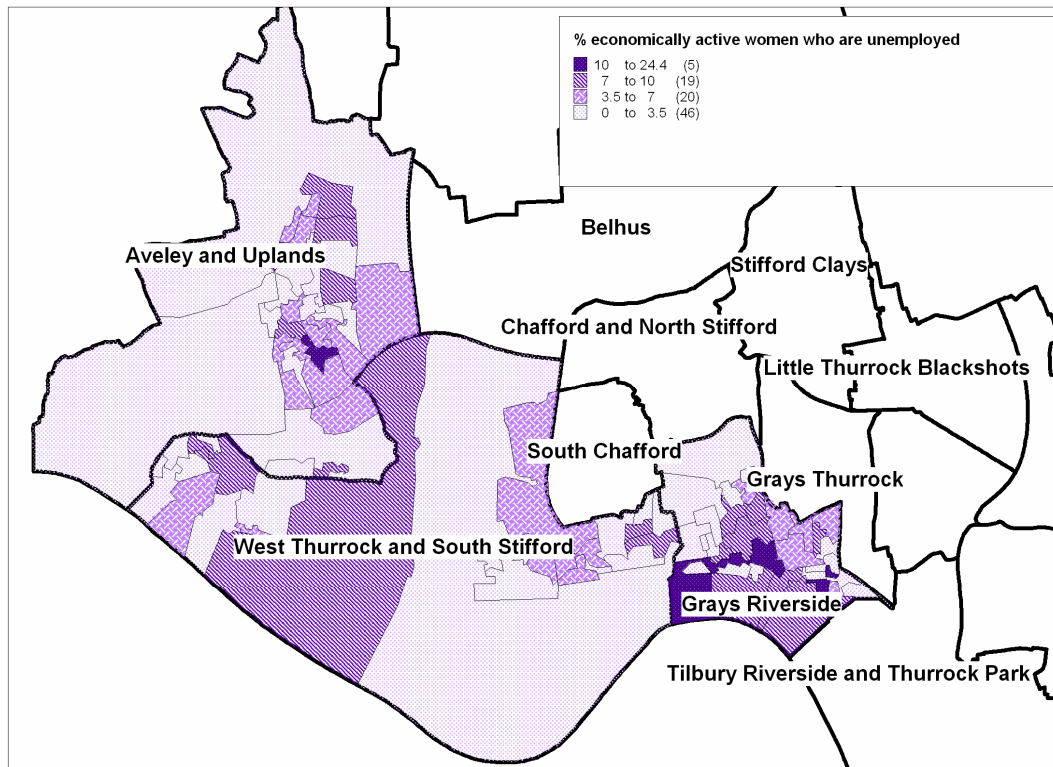
Economic inactivity and unemployment

Figure A4 Economic inactivity and unemployment in the wards

	Aveley and Uplands		Grays Riverside		West Thurrock and South Stifford		Thurrock		England	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Working age (WA) population (16-64/59)	2,623	2,489	3,308	3,165	3,715	3,562	46,053	43,859		
Employment rate										
People of WA	80	67	80	67	69	58	80	67	74	64
EA people	92	93	92	90	88	87	92	92	91	91
Unemployment rate										
People of WA	5	3	6	6	7	5	4	3	5	3
EA people	6	4	6	8	10	8	5	4	6	4
Economic inactivity rate - Proportion of WA	13	28	12	26	22	33	13	27	18	29
Economic inactivity by reason – Proportion of WA										
Retired	2	2	2	0	2	1	3	1	3	1
Student	2	2	2	2	6	5	2	3	5	6
Looking after home/family	1	17	1	15	2	15	1	16	1	14
Permanently sick/disabled	5	4	4	4	7	4	5	4	6	5
Other reason	3	3	4	5	5	7	2	3	3	4
Economic inactivity by reason – Proportion of Econ. Inactive										
Retired	18	4	8	1	7	2	19	4	16	5
Student	16	9	16	7	29	17	18	10	29	19
Looking after home/family	7	61	8	59	8	47	8	60	6	48
Permanently sick/disabled	41	15	35	16	32	13	38	14	33	19
Other reason	19	12	33	17	24	21	17	13	16	12
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Change in economic inactivity – proportion of WA										
1991	12	34	9	28	7	32	11	33	13	32
2001	13	28	12	26	22	33	13	27	18	29
Change in unemployment – proportion of WA										
1991	12	5	10	5	10	5	10	4	10	5
2001	5	3	6	6	7	5	4	3	5	3
Change in unemployment – proportion of EA										
1991	13	8	11	7	11	8	11	6	11	7
2001	6	4	6	8	10	8	5	4	6	4

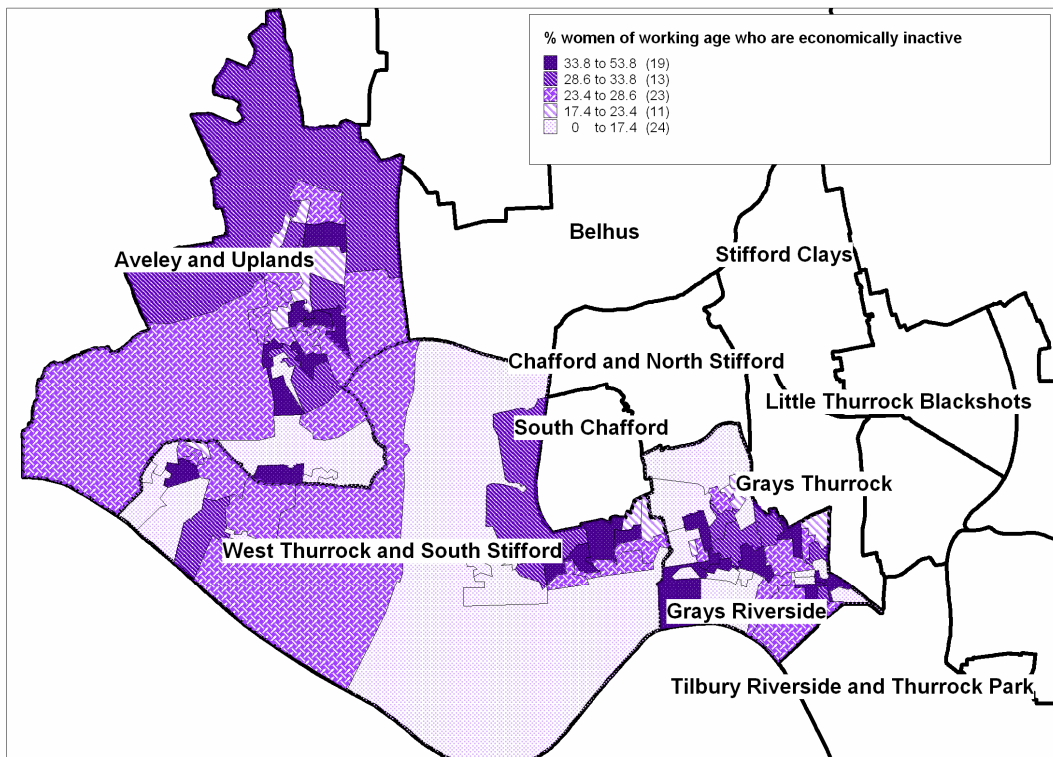
Source: 2001 Census Standard Statistics, Crown Copyright 2003

Figure A5 Percentage of women of working age who were unemployed



Source: 2001 Census Standard Theme Tables, Crown Copyright 2003. 2001 Census Output Area boundaries, Crown Copyright 2003.

Figure A6 Percentage of women of working age who were economically inactive



Source: 2001 Census Standard Theme Tables, Crown Copyright 2003. 2001 Census Output Area boundaries, Crown Copyright 2003.

Figure A8 Qualifications by age and employment

	Aveley & Uplands		Grays Riverside		West Thurrock & South Stifford		Thurrock		England	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
People with no qualifications (%)										
16-24	27	20	21	19	23	19	23	19	19	16
25-34	21	19	20	15	21	19	18	15	17	14
35-49	45	38	31	29	31	27	33	29	29	26
50-64/59	77	73	66	64	61	59	60	55	56	52
People of working age in employment (%)										
No qualifications	73	54	68	50	56	37	72	55	65	50
Lower level	84	73	86	71	68	56	85	71	76	66
Higher level	86	85	86	79	84	83	87	82	85	79

Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

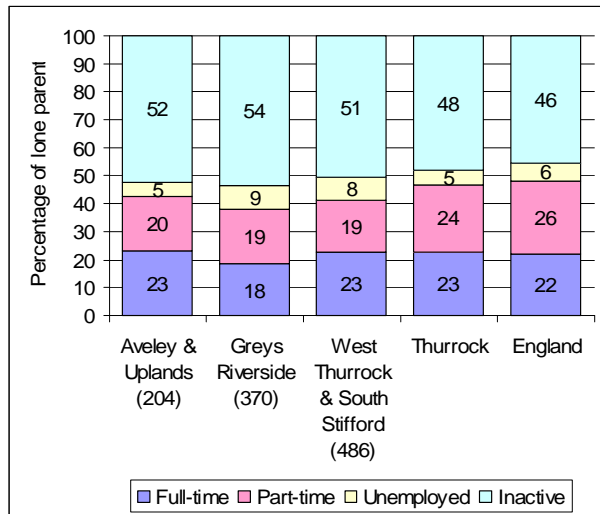
Note: Lower level qualifications were equivalent to 'A' level and below, and higher level qualifications were equivalent to first degree and above.

Figure A9 Former occupations and industries of unemployed and economically inactive women

	Aveley & Uplands	Grays Riverside	West Thurrock & South Stifford	Thurrock	England
Occupation					
Managers, senior officials	4	6	6	6	7
Professionals	2	3	3	2	6
Associate professionals & technical occupations	10	8	5	7	9
Personal services	12	12	13	12	13
Sales and customer services	25	25	25	25	17
Process, plant and machine operatives	5	2	4	2	5
Elementary occupations	19	17	26	19	21
Industrial sector					
Manufacturing	7	7	8	7	11
Wholesale, retail, hotel, restaurants	33	31	33	31	22
Health and social work	12	9	10	11	16
Finance and real estate	18	18	14	18	15

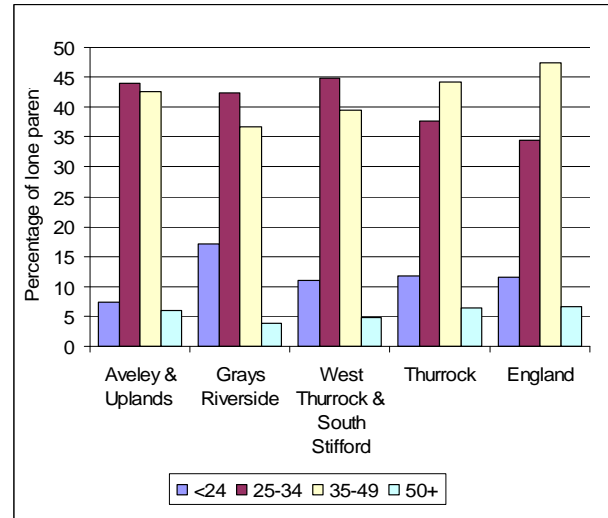
Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

Figure A10 Female lone parents and economic activity



Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

Figure A11 Lone parents by Age



Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

Travel to work

Figure A12 Method and distance travelled to work

People of working age (%)	Aveley & Uplands		Grays Riverside		West Thurrock & South Stifford		Thurrock		England	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Method										
Work mainly at /from home	7	7	7	6	7	5	8	6	10	8
Underground, metro, tram	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	3
Train	9	11	13	15	12	18	12	14	5	4
Bus; minibus; coach	2	7	2	6	2	9	2	7	5	11
Driving a car or van	64	54	60	45	58	46	62	52	58	51
Passenger in a car or van	6	8	6	8	5	8	5	8	5	8
On foot	3	7	5	17	7	9	3	10	7	13
Other	6	3	6	2	7	3	6	2	7	3
Distance										
Home	8	14	15	31	20	27	9	20	15	25
0-2km	20	27	25	29	16	21	15	21	18	23
2-5km	34	33	22	15	26	22	34	32	34	33
5-20km	18	16	20	18	20	23	22	19	9	6
20-40km	4	2	5	1	4	2	4	2	7	3
40+km	10	1	7	1	7	1	8	1	7	2
Other	7	7	7	6	7	5	8	6	10	8

Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright