

## What is “worklessness”?

A “google” search on the Internet for “definition of worklessness” reveals over 30,000 entries. Including this one:

*“Worklessness is defined, for the purposes of this review, as detachment from the formal labour market in particular areas, and among particular groups. Workless individuals include individuals who are unemployed and claiming unemployment benefits, individuals who are economically inactive and eligible for inactive benefits (who may or may not be claiming them), and individuals who are working exclusively in the informal economy (who may or may not be also claiming benefits).”*

Translated into plain English, people are considered workless if they are of working age (16-64 for men and 16 to 59 for women) and are claiming one or more working age benefit. The three principle working age benefits are:

- Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)
- Incapacity Benefit (IB)
- Lone Parent Benefit (LP)

With almost 35,000 people in Wigan considered to be “workless” it is very easy to focus on the impersonal statistics, and to lose sight of the fact that every one of the 35,000 workless people in Wigan is an individual with their own story.

## Personalising “worklessness” - case studies

These are all real situations, though the names have been changed along with one or two minor details, to protect people who did not want to be identified.

Each situation has been chosen to provide contrasting circumstances of people ‘at risk’ or already in receipt of benefits to support them as they are not in paid employ.

### **Josie – 41, single, white British female.**

Josie is a true Wiganer, born and bred. She lives with parents, having spent a period abroad, has a foreign national live-in partner who is studying as a mature student. Josie did well at school, and has worked all her adult life, now has a responsible job for a firm offering financial consultancy. Josie has always contributed to the family budget for house and food, has recently moved house (house is in her name) so her parents are more comfortable. Both now very elderly, her parents are beginning to suffer from Dementia. Josie is an only child and is becoming the sole carer for both parents. She has promised her mother (who is still very aware) that she will not ‘put them in a

home' but she is finding herself unable to continue with her pressurised job which expects long hours on top of sometimes weeks of repeatedly disturbed nights. Josie's firm may be looking for redundancies, and Josie will take this if offered, however she is considering simply packing work in if redundancy is not available, so that she can devote the time needed to supporting her parents.

**Mark (51), John (45), brothers, single, white British**

Mark and John were born into a large family, to a Wigan dad and in-comer mother from Wales. Father was a miner, Mother has been a widow for many years, and suffers from a debilitating lung condition which leaves her virtually housebound. Mark and John have an older brother who works full time as a caterer and still lives at home, contributes financially to the household, and a married sister who lives nearby. Mark and John both have special needs, John much more severely so than Mark. Both can follow instructions to some degree, but Mark can hold a (slightly limited) conversation, and carry out many quite complex tasks, including helping to dress his brother, making tea and helping clean in the house. Mark can neither read nor write, though he can make out the meaning of some written communications. John can hardly speak and needs full time care; he usually attends a day centre. Mark does not need this support, he can go out on his own, and attends the local church where he assists in a variety of tasks, under supervision of church members he has learned to trust and obey. Some years ago Mark 'went out to work' spending time at a placement which he greatly enjoyed. However, the placement ceased by mutual agreement, as Mark was of limited use at work, and it was a challenge to get him to the place of work some miles from home. In any case his mother felt she needed him at home to help her with domestic things when she was going through a bad patch.

**Nathan – 22 single white British male, his dad Jonathon 50 white British male, married**

Nathan is the elder of two brothers. His father was diagnosed soon after he was born with a rare genetic disorder that affects muscles and nerves. This prevented Jonathan continuing in the career he had pursued since leaving school, he is now unable to continue in paid work – being constantly tired, subject to bouts of nausea, and with physical problems associated with his condition. He does however still support the family in many ways, and is active in his local place of worship. Nathan has inherited the genetic condition, but it is worse in his case, and he is not expected to live to old age, and has somewhat arrested mental/emotional development such that he is considered to have a mental age of about 12. In spite of this, Nathan has completed a number of academic qualifications, including drama at college. He loves music and performing, and enjoys attending church 'for the opportunities it gives' – he assists with serving at the altar and helps at fund-raising events. Nathan finds people difficult, he often misinterprets intentions and believes others are angry or have negative intentions towards him, and easily falls out with people. When this happens he can be very rude, as he says whatever is

in his mind. However he is also affectionate and generous, and loves company of his own age.

**Joanne 32, white British female single mother of three girls 15, 13, and 12**

Joanne has lived on the same Wigan estate since she was born. She did not distinguish herself in school, which she hated, and left as soon as she could, pregnant with her first child. Joanne has a history of self-harm, but has recovered from Bulimia. Three years ago she became involved with her community centre, doing voluntary work, and last year was taken on full time to do the same work, on some short term funding obtained by a group using the centre. The funding has finished, and the group pulled out. Although Joanne has been offered the chance of a job elsewhere, she has no driving license, and the public transport to the places she could work is too slow and expensive to fit with her family responsibilities.

**Janice 37 – white British Female 37**

Janice lives with a partner and their only son in the Wigan area, having moved with her mum from St Helens on the breakdown of her mum's marriage, when Janice was small. She is the youngest of the family, and can't remember her dad, but is close to her mum's new partner. Several years ago mum was diagnosed with cancer, though treatment enabled three or four years of fully active life for her. Soon after her mother's diagnosis, Janice developed Crone's Disease, resulting in her losing her job - she worked in a beauty parlour. Janice's mum supported her through the diagnosis and early management of the disease, and Janice now copes well most of the time, taking care what and when she eats. As mum's cancer developed, the care rolls reversed, and Janice's full time care for her mother (along with other family) enabled mum's wish to remain at home to be met. Mum has now died, leaving Janice's days empty when they had been full of nursing, fetching and carrying. Janice has always been prone to depression, and is looking for something to give meaning to life so she can be there for her partner and son.

**Case Studies – non British**

A family of four male cousins aged 21-25 from Portugal came to the UK in 2005 and worked in the agricultural industry north of Southport. In the summer months they regularly worked 13 hour days and went as long as 24 days without a day off. The work was hard and they had few breaks. Their accommodation was provided by their employer in the form of a caravan with access to a communal shower block. Deductions were made from their wages to pay for this caravan leaving them with less than 100 pounds per week.

Their employer also owned a factory in Skelmersdale and decided to move the cousins there. They had no choice in the matter, as if they refused, they would lose both their jobs and their accommodation. They had put down roots in Southport where there is a large Portuguese migrant community and had been regularly attending ESOL classes. One of the men in particular had

made good progress with his studies. At the time of leaving Southport there were no ESOL classes in Skelmersdale.

Y is a 56 year old woman from Slovakia. She worked as a health care assistant in her home country but has been unable to find work in the same job in the UK as she speaks no English. Instead she works on a farm picking vegetables and packing them. She lives in a hostel and sends money home to her family. She doesn't understand her pay slip and brought it to her ESOL class for the teacher to explain. When the teacher queried the number of hours on the pay slip and how little she was paid Y explained that she knew she was being exploited but was frightened that she would lose her job and be unable to find another if she complained. She suffered poor health from working outside in the cold without proper clothing and had trouble accessing a GP and relied on medicine brought into the UK from Europe by other migrant workers

X is a 29 year old lawyer from Spain. Although she is qualified at home and speaks fluent English she has been unable to work in the legal field in the UK. She works as a hotel receptionist and hopes that her experience will allow her to work as a legal secretary in the future. She started college in order to gain a recognised English qualification, attending lessons 2 evenings per week. She works anti-social hours and has had several issues with her pay.

B is a 28 year old native French speaker from an African country. Leaving their daughter with grandparents B fled for his life after his wife was killed by a hostile regime. B entered Britain illegally, and has spent many months in accommodation provided by the authorities, while his asylum application was being processed. B joined his local Anglican church and asked to be confirmed, however soon after he was moved across town, and found keeping in touch with the people who had befriended him difficult. B has hopes of breaking into the music scene, as he loves music and has a natural sense of rhythm and pitch. However he has no musical training, and no instrument or possibility of learning. He has talked about getting on to a college course to improve his English (which is quite good but heavily accented), but while his application is being processed he believes he cannot either study or work. Recently his application was turned down, but the advice he has obtained has suggested that an appeal stands a good chance, and he is now waiting that outcome. Meanwhile B has plans to try Manchester as a more likely place to meet with people from his (small) country.