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PROGRAMME: "NICE WORK"

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INTERVIEWEES:

Norman Tebbit, former Conservative employment secretary

Steve Guest – manager, City Job Centre

Pete Holmes, hostel support worker, Hull Resettlement Project

Mike Watson, chief executive of the Humber Community Partnership

Des Brown, Minister for Work

Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, leader of Kent County Council

Joy MacMillan, chief executive, the Women Returners Network

Francis Mansfield, scientist

Steve Willis, personal fitness trainer

Valerie Spence, employment policy adviser, accountancy firm, Price Waterhouse Coopers

Theresa Smith, tutor, Oxford Women's Training Scheme

Dimpna, student

Fiona Prince, student

Judith, student

Kevin Charles, Euro Tunnel

LAMB: Hello. In the programme today, cross-channel commuters. How would you fancy living in France and travelling back to work in England every day, and the daunting business of going back to work after a long career break, how to set about it and why there's never been a better time to do it. First though, these days getting to and from work can be a real ordeal with road and transport systems sometimes stretched to breaking point the daily rush hour journey is something most of us prefer to keep as short as possible. But how far should we be willing to travel to work? At a conservative party conference back in 1981 employment secretary, Norman Tebbit, thought job seekers were being far too lazy.

TEBBIT: I grew up in the '30s with an unemployed father. He got on his bike and looked for work and he kept looking until he found it.

LAMB: Well the government has changed political colour since then but it's still pushing the unemployed to widen their job search. From next April anyone out of work and on benefit for more than three months will have to consider jobs an hour and a half away. If they don't they risk having their money cut or stopped altogether. The idea is to encourage people living in areas of high unemployment to travel to work in better off regions and our reporter, Mike Johnson, has been to Hull to assess the impact the new system might have there.

JOHNSON: This is the harbour side at Hull. It's a historic fishing port of course and the docks are just over there to my right with their huge passenger ferries and cargo ships plying backwards and forwards. But really these days the sea no longer provides enough to support the people here. Hull's rate of unemployment is currently more than double the national average and it's exactly places like this that the government is trying to target with its changes to the benefit system.

GUEST: We're in our job shop here in Queen's House in Hull. Where you see to your right hand side there our staff dealing with customers who are looking for jobs. Around the outside of the room people looking at our job points which are interactive, self-

help devices that people can actually use to search for jobs across the district and right across the country if you want to do that.

JOHNSON: Steve Guest can offer all the technology that people of Hull could ever want to help them search far and wide for work. He manages the city job centre. Tightening the rules on travel to work will mean people coming through his doors will have to widen their search to cities like York, Leeds and Manchester if they want to keep getting benefit. It'll be a big change for an area where people have traditionally been reluctant to travel too far to work.

GUEST: People in Hull are probably less willing to travel than other parts of the region that I've worked in. People in this area are prepared to travel 30 minutes, 40 minutes, up to an hour. I think that's probably a cultural thing to start with. Hull's an isolated location and people just seem reluctant to travel outside the area.

JOHNSON: So next year when commuting time lengthens from an hour to an hour and a half, do you think your advisers here are going to be encouraging people a little bit more vigorously to find work further away.

GUEST: We have the facility to ask people to travel further. In this day and age I think it's accepted that people do travel further, probably transport is better than it was, road links are better than they were. I think it is quite feasible that we will have to look a bit further to find the jobs.

JOHNSON: But not everyone in Hull is a reluctant commuter.

HOLMES: I'm Pete Holmes, a hostel support worker for Hull resettlement project. I'm at the Hull bus station at the moment and I'm just about to get on the bus to go home to Hornsey and that will take me about an hour and twenty minutes.

JOHNSON: Pete Holmes was out of work for 2½ years before landing his current job. He says he's happy to travel because he has no family commitments, the work pays

reasonably well and he enjoys it. But others he reckons aren't so lucky. So how will they react to having their benefits cut if they refuse to travel further.

MAN: Two words and the second one would be "off".

MAN: The jobs that are available are usually minimum wage. If somebody's doing forty hours a week they're going to be picking up about £140, £145, then they've got £25 travel expenses out of it and they're going to be away from the home for fifteen hours a day. So it's just not going to be practical for them to do it, especially somebody with a family. You'll have a revolt on your hands.

JOHNSON: And revolt was certainly the reaction at Hull's Shire Thorn centre where the city's unemployed are retrained under the government's new deal programme.

MAN: It's another hurdle to trip you up, a way to exclude people from benefits. The buses are infrequent, they often don't run on time. So most of that travelling time isn't travelling time, it's standing around waiting time.

LADY: Can you imagine how early you'd have to get up if you had to travel an hour and a half? You wouldn't get to bed, would you? I'd get so home late in winter when it's cold and it's dark nights and I've got to walk from the train station to my flat on my own in the dark. I don't really like doing that, I don't like the thought. I couldn't do that and I don't think many could.

MAN: An hour and a half, well that's going to be, that's going to be pretty expensive isn't it that? On a minimum wage, I mean you just couldn't do it.

JOHNSON: And the man who runs their training agrees. Mike Watson is chief executive of the Humber Community Partnership. He says even if they could afford to travel they wouldn't be equipped for the jobs available.

WATSON: 25% of the people come to us who have reading, writing or numeracy, problems. I mean it's one thing being willing to travel, it's another thing if you're faced

with a huge issue of basic skills and basic skills needs. Beating people with sticks won't get them into work. I can't see forcing people to travel actually working.

LAMB: Mike Watson ending that report by Mike Johnson. Now Minister for Work, Des Brown, is in our Westminster studio. He's the man who'll be responsible for implementing the new travel time rules. Mr Brown, this sounds like a tough policy. How rigorously do you intend to enforce it?

BROWN: Well that will depend on the individual circumstances of the individual claimant. I'd just like to say, Philippa, at the outset when Norman Tebbit made those infamous remarks in 1981, unemployment was marching towards 3 million or more. Long-term unemployment was 1.3 million of whom 300,000 were young people. His exhortation to the unemployed at that stage was a sum and substance of the government's policy. And to caricature what we are seeking to do with a package of measures which engages those who are unemployed for thirteen weeks or more, or indeed those who come into that position in this way, really misrepresents the success of our economic policies and our intervention in the job markets which is manifest - 1.5 million more jobs, 500,000 fewer people registered for benefits.

LAMB: Well tell me how you're intending to actually implement this then, there will be a degree of discretion at local job centre level, will there?

BROWN: Well we will apply these regulations the same way in which we apply the other regulations that have conditionality attached to them for an individual. The adviser and the individual will work together and we will work with people to help them expand their horizons, to increase their own activity in terms of getting jobs because the whole relationship that we have with those people, who are the job seekers, is one of rights and responsibilities.

LAMB: Are you hoping that people will relocate rather than do the perhaps three-hours travel a day and begin to break down perhaps the communities where long-term unemployment is now stretched over two and three generations?

BROWN: What we are hoping will happen is that people will have their horizons expanding. I mean your piece from Hull was manifestly redolent of a group of people whose horizons had not been expanded in terms of job search. Now our experience suggests to us that people will not have to go one and a half hours in order to find jobs. Indeed before I came on to this programme, I checked and there are 50,000 vacancies reported to the job centres that serve Hull every year. So what we want to do, is we want to increase the level of intervention with the individual, we want to ask more of the individual and we want to expand the individual's horizons after they have been unemployed for thirteen weeks. That doesn't seem to be an unreasonable thing to do and we've proved with our interventions up until now that it works for people and improves their lives.

LAMB: Des Brown, thank you for that. We shall monitor the scheme with interest. And staying with travelling to work, Euro Tunnel and Kent County Council are joining forces in the bid to persuade thousands of people currently living and working in London and south-east to move to France and commute back to England instead. If the scheme were to go ahead, 10,000 new homes could be built in the Pas-de-Calais to house cross-channel commuters and the price of a daily return ticket might fall as low as £10. But would anyone actually want to live in France and work in Britain. We put that question to commuters at London's Charing Cross Station.

COMMUTER: I think it's too far, too long. I'd say it would be a complete disaster area.

COMMUTER: I would definitely move to Calais providing they give us enough money towards the fare from Calais to London.

COMMUTER: I think it's a very good idea and I would consider living in the Calais area and commuting. There are obviously a lot of benefits to it, yes.

COMMUTER: Well it's obviously going to depend on the house prices to see if it's going to be worth it. The property prices would have to be a big incentive.

COMMUTER: I think if the price is right a lot of people would do it, if the service is good. We've actually talked about it before because France is lovely.

COMMUTER: Ha, ha, ha, ha! If I was single, yes I would do it, but as I'm married with three children, no I wouldn't consider it.

LAMB: Well, inevitably perhaps, a mixed response there from London commuters. But what exactly is the thinking behind cross-channel commuting. I spoke to Kevin Charles of Euro Tunnel.

CHARLES: Clearly, if you look at cross-border relationships between other countries, people commute quite freely between France and Germany, France and Italy, France and Spain, for example, and what we want to do is to look at ways in which we can perhaps develop the efficiency of the Franco-British border.

LAMB: So you're talking about thousands of British people moving over to France but commuting every day back to England to work?

CHARLES: That's correct. What we've said is in order for it to be an economically viable project, we would be looking at a community of somewhere in the region of 10,000 people, not necessarily for Euro Tunnel to run a train service but for another regional train service to be up and running say, for example, between towns in northern France around the Pas-de-Calais into places like Ashford and perhaps up to London once the channel tunnel rail link is open.

LAMB: How much will it cost them to travel between France and England every day? Because I think it's about £50 at the moment, isn't it, to travel between Ashford and Kent and Lille on the French side?

CHARLES: What we're saying is if this project can actually get off the ground, then clearly the fares will come down.

LAMB: Kent County Council have been talking about a target of £10.

CHARLES: Right, I mean it needs to be viable, it needs to be something that people will be paying. I mean I think you know perhaps we need to look at some of the commuter fares that people are paying at the moment and we don't think this is something that's pie in the sky. We think there is a real opportunity here.

LAMB: Well, Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart is leader of Kent County Council. He's on the line now. I'm aware that you like this idea perhaps because it could relieve some of the pressure for new housing development in Kent, but what do the authorities in France make of it?

LOCKHART: What does who in France make of it you say?

LAMB: The authorities in France, are they keen on the idea of an English town, as it were, on their side of the channel?

LOCKHART: Well yes they are. I mean France, north-west France, Nord Pas-de-Calais has very similar economic problems to we have in Kent. We lost our coal fields, our ship building industry, our heavy industry in Kent, and much the same thing with steel in north-west France. They have about 13% unemployment, real economic problems, and they would welcome, I think, some boost to the economy over there.

LAMB: I think for most people the question, I mean obviously the idea of living in France is appealing in itself perhaps, but journey cost is going to be an issue for most people. How cheap do you think you could realistically get it?

LOCKHART: Well I mean I think this is the point and, as you said, the County Council is coming to this from two separate points of view. Firstly, we've been told by the Deputy Prime Minister that we're supposed to take 120,000 new houses in Kent, that is a quarter of a million more people into Kent, and those are people moving from the north where I was last week watching houses being bulldozed down because no-one wants to live there, people moving down into Kent. So we have a housing issue, and in looking at

all the ways we could try and deal with that, we were keen to see if some people moving down from the north could move into France.

LAMB: Assuming they did that, what about the practicalities of it? I'm thinking of things like being paid in sterling but doing your shopping in Euros?

LOCKHART: Well I don't think that's a great issue and most people...

LAMB: It exposes you to currency fluctuation, doesn't it?

LOCKHART: Well indeed, but you know we'll wait and see what the chancellor does on that front. But most people we talked to, and indeed we have people commuting at the moment, think that the quality of life issues over there are good. The cost of living is cheaper, houses are about half price and don't forget that if you're living in east Kent at the moment it takes you two hours to commute from east Kent to London now. That's longer than from London to York. So what we're talking about is actually quite a short journey across the 22 miles of the channel from Calais and then on into Ashford.

LAMB: Sir Sandy, I'm sorry we're going to have to leave it there but we shall watch that with interest. I think it's a fascinating idea. Thanks very much for joining us. Anyone who has ever returned to work after a few years at home looking after children or caring for a relative will tell you that it's a difficult business fraught with practical and emotional difficulties. But the opportunities for people, particularly women, to get back into paid work after a break are greater now than they've ever been. Joy MacMillan is with me. She's chief executive of an organisation called the "Women Returners Network" which provides advice and training to would-be returners. Joy, this is one of those problems that doesn't get talked about a lot but it clearly affects a lot of people. Do you have any estimate of how many people are out there who are thinking about getting back to work?

MACMILLAN: Well it's almost impossible to put a clear figure on it but we know that it's a very large pool of women and it's an important target group because of the

demographics that we're facing in the future, older and ageing population, older workers and fewer younger people to fill the gaps in the market.

LAMB: Now I know that you believe this is a particularly great time to do this. Why is that?

MACMILLAN: Well I think that there was a big hiatus of women returners at the end of the '80s, early '90s. I think that the issues were kind of masked by the recession in 92/93 but I think now is the time when actually the opportunities for women are greater than they've ever been.

LAMB: Francis Mansfield's also with us. Francis I know you took a twelve year career break to bring up your four children. You're now back in work and I want to ask you about that in a moment, but first tell me were you worried about the idea of going back?

MANSFIELD: Absolutely terrified.

LAMB: Why?

MANSFIELD: Well it was just such a long time, all those things you hear about, lack of confidence and just the challenge of going back into that work place, it just filled me with horror actually, but I kind of knew that I just needed to give it a go as well. But yes.

LAMB: Was the technology a barrier to you, the idea of getting back and having to use perhaps technology you hadn't used before?

MANSFIELD: Yes, everything has changed. Everything is just totally different now, but even still there's still a chance to do it, so.

LAMB: Before the phone starts ringing off the hook, I should mention at this point that it is not just women who have to confront this problem. There are now around 100,000 home dads looking after their children while their wives go out to work and many

more caring for relatives at home. Steve Willis was a brick layer before giving up work for three years to look after his two children. Like many women before him he found that being at home changed him and created problems when it came to looking for a job.

WILLIS: It was quite a lonely life. It was just me and the children, the children for company. Before I was looking after children I was very outward going and I think over time I become very quiet and lost my self-esteem and I think that's been quite a big hurdle, is that I need to be very outward going, confident. I need to have very good social skills and that's something that I found difficult to pick up after three years of being quiet on my own.

LAMB: Steve decided to retrain as a personal fitness trainer and he now has a job on a freelance basis at a health club. But when he was job hunting he learnt to avoid talking about his three years caring for his children because of the negative reaction he got from potential employers.

WILLIS: You get some who pat you on the back and say, I don't know how you do it, or you get the others that think that I didn't really want to go to work in that three years and it was an opportunity for me to sit around all day watching "Tele Tubbies" and pressuring my wife to go out to work and keep me and be a kept man.

LAMB: Joy MacMillan, I think anyone who's spent time at home watching Tele Tubbies knows that's not much of an incentive to be there. But more and more men are staying at home to look after their kids. Would you say they face bigger problems perhaps even than women because of this thing that he alluded to, the negative perception on the part of potential employers about people who've been at home with kids?

MACMILLAN: Well I think the issue there really is confidence and I think that Steve mentioned lack of confidence, lack of self-esteem, and I think that's an equal point for both women and men.

LAMB: And that crosses all boundaries, doesn't it, of class of you know it doesn't matter what job you did before?

MACMILLAN: The research we've done recently confirms that very point, that in fact it doesn't matter what educational status you have or wherever you've been, it cuts across everyone really and I think it cuts across genders as well.

LAMB: Now of course you are the Women Returners Network, but you do advise men as well, I understand?

MACMILLAN: We do actually. We get a lot of calls from men and when we're doing training with women we get a lot of men who are quite jealous really of their wives having a second chance.

LAMB: Well some returners are quite fortunate. Valerie Spence is employment policy adviser at the accountancy firm, Price Waterhouse Coopers, which is one of the many big employers offering an in-house career-break scheme. Now Valerie, how exactly does your scheme work?

SPENCE: Well we've run a career-break scheme for a number of years as part of a range of flexible working options and it's open to anyone within the firm to apply. So it's not just women or not just people who have caring responsibilities.

LAMB: How many years can you take out?

SPENCE: You can take up to four years either in one block or in two blocks with a period of one year between the two.

LAMB: Now I know you've got a scheme of "buddies" which you assign people to keep everyone up-to-date on their skills. How does that work?

SPENCE: Yes. We recognise that it can be really difficult, as I think we'll hear from Francis, having been out of the working environment for a substantial period of time. So the career breaks that have worked most successfully have been those where people

have kept in regular contact with the work place and both to keep their training up-to-date and also to make the process of returning less daunting after the break.

LAMB: Just keep in touch with the people.

SPENCE: Yes.

LAMB: Do you feel, based on your experience, that there's an optimum link for a career break. I mean obviously it's a very personal choice this, but is a certain period of time too long?

SPENCE: I think it depends on the person and the job and the amount of contact during the period of the career break. But certainly our particular scheme we offer up to a maximum of four years which could be tacked on to a period of maternity leave. So potentially somebody can be out of the office for a period of five years which I think is quite a daunting prospect.

LAMB: Well despite the growing number of employers offering career-break schemes, the majority of returners do not have a job to go back to. So for many people re-entering the work force means learning a new skill as Steve Willis, who we heard from earlier, discovered. Nowadays, the options are many and varied and our reporter, Caroline Bayley, joined a group of women in Oxford who are swapping full-time caring for something completely different.

BAYLEY: Here at the Oxford Women's Training Scheme, the students are learning basic building skills such as plastering, decorating, even changing taps and for some it's their first step towards work after several years at home bringing up their children. Theresa Smith, you're one of the tutors. What's the aim of this?

SMITH: The aim is to get women into construction. So get rid of this male-orientated work force and maybe get some women out there that are quite capable of doing it.

BAYLEY: Who are you targeting?

SMITH: Our main target is people that have maybe been unemployed, haven't got good education backgrounds and people that haven't worked for a long time because they've been bringing up their children. Some of them can be very quiet and think they're not capable of doing anything and then a year or two down the line they walk away with a qualification.

BAYLEY: Dimpna, why are you doing this course?

DIMPNA: I haven't worked for a long time and I don't want to get a low-pay job, I'd like to go and earn a decent wage so that I can make a good life for us. I don't want to go into a shop or something where I'm going to get a minimum wage because it's not going to be worthwhile my working. So the only way I can get a decent job is training and this is basically the only training that's available to me with child care unless I want to do computer training.

BAYLEY: The course is free and the students are given help with child care and transport costs.

JUDITH Disconnecting the taps from the sink.

BAYLEY: Fiona and Judith are in the process of replacing a sink. Now you've both got children at home and you haven't been working for a period. What has this course been like?

JUDITH: I've not worked now for four years and I think just having the confidence to go into the work place and this is sort of like the first step, even though this isn't the work place. It's people that you don't know and you make relationships and you're learning things. So it's a step in the right direction to us getting back to work, yes.

BAYLEY: What were you doing before you had children?

JUDITH: I was a computer programmer, ha, ha, ha, ha. I was actually quite a good computer programmer I think.

BAYLEY: So this is quite a change?

JUDITH: Oh this is a new start, yea.

BAYLEY: Fiona, how long have you been at home with your son?

PRINCE: Probably about seven years now. I've been climbing the walls, shall we say, and really wanted something, a new direction in my life I think and wanted to learn something completely new, a new skill and with a view to go on and be some sort of handy woman.

LAMB: Fiona Prince ending that report by Caroline Bayley. Joy, would it be fair to say that perhaps this big group of returners, men and women, it's a good opportunity to fill the skills gap that we hear so much about?

MACMILLAN: Yes. I think there's lots of things coming out just now about skills gaps and I think that women have to look at their home-to-work skills that they have. I mean essentially they're home managers.

LAMB: So this is using the skills that you perhaps brought to bear and learnt on raising children or caring for someone and bringing them into the work place.

MACMILLAN: Yes.

LAMB: What sort of thing are you talking about?

MACMILLAN: Well organisational skills, communication skills, and we have a chart on our website that they can look at, that they can sort of go through and work out what skills they are good at and then perhaps look at a new direction that they can go into. So that's what's very helpful to them.

LAMB: Francis Mansfield, we heard from you earlier, you're a scientist, you've got a doctorate. You told us earlier about the worries you had with dealing with technology and going back to work. You've now gone back into a scientific job. How did you set about doing that?

MANSFIELD: Well I did this by gaining a Daphne Jackson Fellowship. It's a Trust which encourages women who have trained in science and taken an extended break and allowed them to return to science to update, to retrain and all the rest of it. And I've got one of those Fellowships now and I'm carrying it out, at Fizer actually, a pharmaceutical company at Sandwich and so far it's going okay.

LAMB: I mean how is it going, because it's all very well, the retraining sounds great but it's still a scary business isn't it, actually going back to work?

MANSFIELD: Yes it was very scary at the very beginning because everything, there's been a biotechnology revolution, you know, everything's changed. Information technology had minimal skills in that area as well. In fact in the laboratory that I was working, I could honestly say that nothing looked familiar to me even pipetting was electronic, everything had changed.

LAMB: So you just walked back in and thought what is this place, I don't know how to deal with this any more?

MANSFIELD: No, no, no, I've been really fortunate in that I'm working with a good team of people, I've got great encouragement there, support and they've been fantastic and given me that feeling that no it's possible you know.

LAMB: I presume that you find that your contemporaries who haven't taken time out of work have now shot up the career ladder?

MANSFIELD: Yea I mean my contemporaries, they're more senior than me, there's many much younger people there who are more senior than me.

LAMB: That must be a bit hard to deal with?

MANSFIELD: Yes, but as you said, I've had four children and I made a conscious decision that I wanted to be a full-time mum and so I've done that and I feel happy about that and now that they're all at school it got to a stage where I had time to think about me and it's been great to actually live the other side of me in doing this Fellowship.

LAMB: Joy, this is a big issue isn't it the actual when you're back in a job or the job whatever you were doing before, things do change very rapidly, the whole business of working with very young people all of a sudden or having a very young boss. It's a big deal, isn't it?

MACMILLAN: Yes, I think it goes to the issue of confidence of getting that confidence back and I think, as Francis says, you know it's very good if you've got people in the work place who can help you along. And I think employers now are recognising that it's not just an equal opportunities issue, it's a business, it's the business case that they get these people back they've employed before or who've got skills that they need and will need in the future.

LAMB: This is a key point Francis isn't it, because I know that science has a particularly poor record of getting women to go back which is ironic when you think of the money that's spent on training scientists. Why is it such a problem in science, do you know?

MANSFIELD: Because, as I said before, everything's changing so quickly and to just to be able to go back straight in there where you left off is impossible you know. But what hasn't changed in the time that you're away I'm realising just slowly is that not all is lost. Although I'm in a completely new subject area now, the way of thinking scientifically is still kind of in there somewhere in me. So there's a chance yet I think.

LAMB: So you're still a scientist even when you were being a mum really at heart?

MANSFIELD: Yea I suppose I was maybe. And also, as you said earlier on, you do gain from experience of being a full-time mum, I think. It's not all that everything is lost and you do gain time management, you have to become flexible and multi-task, all those terms we hear so much about now and I think it gets to a stage where you've got everything to gain from these schemes now, there's nothing to lose so.

LAMB: Joy, finally, the Daphne Jackson Trust works with industry to create nice opportunities, the sort of things we've been hearing about that Francis is doing. Are you hopeful that now employers have got their heads round the fact that they need returners, that there's going to be more of that?

MACMILLAN: Yes. We've been going for 25 years and I'm very positive now that things are changing. It's still slow, still slow progress but I do feel very positive that we will see changes in the next two or three years.

LAMB: Joy MacMillan, Francis Mansfield and Valerie Spence thank you all very much indeed. That's it for today. If you'd like more information about this afternoon's programme, call the BBC Action Line. Here's the number, 0800 044 044. Check out our website at www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/nicework. You can also listen to the programme again there and if you'd like to get in touch, email us at nicework@bbc.co.uk. Join me again for the last programme in the current series same time next week.