

FIN(4)FW080  
Finance Wales Inquiry  
Response from Clarissa Chambers

My name is Clarissa Chambers. I viewed a Tweet from the Welsh Government following which I tweeted a response & was asked to send you an email regarding my personal experience relating to difficulties in starting up my own business. Here is my personal experience of what I've been through. I'll apologise for it being a bit long but I feel the need to explain just how difficult things have really been.

About five years ago I came up with an idea for a mixed alternative lifestyle shop, here in the Rhonnda area, as there was and is absolutely nothing in the area to cater to those within the "alternative" lifestyle. At that time I was working just under part time hours doing bar work so I was claiming JSA. I spoke with a very nice lady at Tonyandy job centre who suggested I went to Business in Focus & other agencies if our business plans were thought to be viable. This turned out not to be true. In relation to finance the course only included talks from banks about their business accounts & how the bank would help but only once we had our businesses up and running. I understand that these companies rely on government funding and that they need people on their courses in order to continue their own funding, however I feel that to lie to people who were relying on them to help with financial assistance was as best disingenuous and misleading.

Everyone on the course was disappointed by this news & we all felt let down by Business in Focus. I completed the course and subsequently continued to meet with a worker from Business in Focus who was extremely helpful in providing advice. She informed me on several occasions that she was most impressed by my well-developed business plan. I worked for almost five months on my business plan. I also sought advice from someone who also owns a small business, taking up his time asking questions and having him look over my plans. I should note that he was also extremely impressed by the business plan that I had spent so long developing.

During those five months I carried out a vast amount of research via a number of avenues including on-line forums, reading about other businesses within my idea spectrum, buying and reading magazines & books, looking online & chatting to various individuals from different communities. I worked for many hours on my business proposal & vision, researching the proposed market, the strengths and challenges involved, economic considerations, advertising & promotion, location, legal issues & future development. I spoke with various people about my ideas and all were all most excited, believing that the plan was viable. Almost all who I spoke with were very interested in my plans & said they would visit my business once open. I also looked at premises & went so far as to meet with estate agents to get accurate information regarding premises and associated costs.

Having received a wealth of advice from Business in Focus, I intended to book an appointment with my local bank manager however once I was asked what collateral I had - unfortunately none - I was told I would not be seen. I also met with a borough council representative in Pontypridd who was a very polite man and very interested in my business proposal. Unfortunately yet again as I had no money of my own to use as collateral they could not be of any assistance to me. That being said, it was proposed that were I able to get the business up and running that up to half of my initial costs could be refunded

by the council as a form of grant. This was an extremely generous offer but once again as I had no collateral and no other source of funding the offer was of little value on its own to me and did not assist in actually getting my business up and running.

I then went back to the job centre at Tonypandy and was assigned a new worker. I explained that I had viewed some business information for those in receipt of benefits on the parliamentary website. The individual with whom I met had astonishingly poor professional knowledge and had no idea whatsoever about what I was trying to discuss. Almost four months later I was told that yes, I would in fact be the very first person in the Rhondda area to have this assistance and that I would have my very own business advisor who would be with me every step of the way. I was informed that this company would even produce some funding so that for the purposes of the proposal I received from the council I could legitimately say that I had financial backing. This would have been extremely useful to someone like myself. Up till this point I had explained in great detail to everyone with whom I had met that my ideas were mainly for the "alternative" lifestyle in the way of clothing, jewellery, accessories and other various relevant products.

Eventually I was given a date for a meeting with my advisor at Tonypandy job centre, during which it was explained to me that we would be discussing in some detail my business proposal and the plan I had developed. I had been most excited all week to meet with my business adviser & talk to them about my next steps. I had told people in work what was going on and they had all wished me luck. I spoke with my friend who owns his own business and he provided advice about what questions to ask and gave me confidence.

However, on the morning of the meeting I received a call from my worker at the job centre to say that my meeting had been cancelled. I was shocked. I asked why and her response was that I would bring the Job centre and the DWP into disrepute. This, despite nobody at the job centre having even glanced at what my business plan included, never mind having analysed it in any detail. I was stunned and frankly disgusted that someone had decided that my business proposal would be ignored, apparently based on nothing more than someone's' ill-informed personal opinion rather than any sort of analysis of the viability of the actual plan itself. I could accept the plan being rejected based on a financial analysis of my proposal, though all those professionals and business owners to whom I have showed the plan believe it to be viable and potentially successful, but to base a rejection on mere personal opinion and possibly morality, without having ever once seen the plan itself, appeared to me to be unprofessional in the extreme.

As I'm sure you will appreciate, after all the years that I've been planning to start my own business, to make my own money & being able to pay my own way in life without recourse to benefits of any kind and finally becoming fully independent from the state, being told during a three minute phone call that frankly I would be ignored without my plan ever being seen or even discussed with me was a crushing disappointment. As a direct result I became very depressed as I had worked so hard on this plan & meeting people. I felt that I had wasted their time as well as my own. To not even look at my plan before cancelling my meeting was incredibly unprofessional of the staff at Tonypandy job centre and to be blunt made a total mockery of their "The job you want, the help you need" motto. To this day I have never received an explanation of what the real reason behind the cancellation of my meeting was. Having considered the issue at length, the only reasons I can think of is that having

made an official complaint against a member of staff there in the past, that someone had developed a personal grievance against me, something that is in itself unprofessional. I have no evidence of this, however based on my personal experiences this is the only explanation that fits the facts.

I was then sent by the job centre to Working Links where once again I was told that financial assistance would be available. I went on another business course that Working Links had set up for those wanting assistance. I also met with Business6 where I met with a lovely lady who really wanted to help me as she thought my plan was most viable & agreed a business like mine was very much needed in the Rhondda. I also approached Pontypridd market that had a few empty stalls where I spoke with the assistant manager. When I explained I had some financial backing he was very open to my ideas. I called to speak with the manager the following week only to be told that there was "no room for someone like me." Two weeks later a stall opened that was selling items I would have sold. Once again I felt discriminated against.

I did consider an online shop, but again I would need money for stock & advertising and this would not have been viable as I would have been competing with other businesses that enjoy the benefits of economy of scale in selling. I would also have fallen foul of DWP rules & regulations in that any money earned must be declared and it would have come out of my JSA benefit, as did my wages at that time. I would therefore not been allowed to keep any earnings to put back into stock or bills thus negating the entire purpose of running my own business. I went so far as to apply for a place on "The Apprentice" and got to the second round of the process. This is a small example of how determined & serious I was: I wanted my business to achieve all that it could & I was determined to push myself to make it a success.

So my personal thoughts & conclusion are these. There is no real assistance for individuals like myself, i.e. without collateral starting a business is impossible. I now feel that everything I went through was a smokescreen in order to make the government look as if it wanted to help, but no hard, genuine assistance was ever available.

I still very much want to open my own business - all I need is an opportunity for my business plan to speak for itself! I would be more than happy to meet with anyone to discuss my entire experience, and ideally my plan itself.

Many thanks,

Miss Clarissa Chambers.