

Final findings: Overview

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This overview summarises the final findings of the Welfare Conditionality project (2013-2018). It presents analysis on the effectiveness, impacts and ethics of welfare conditionality, and the sanctions and mandatory support that underpin this approach. Discussion draws on analyses of qualitative data generated in interviews with 52 policy stakeholders, 27 focus groups conducted with practitioners, and repeat qualitative longitudinal interviews undertaken with welfare service users in England and Scotland (481 at wave a). Interviewees were drawn from nine policy areas: jobseekers, Universal Credit (UC) recipients, disabled people, migrants, lone parents, offenders, social tenants, homeless people, and those subject to anti-social behaviour (ASB) interventions and Family Intervention Projects (FIPs).

Key findings

- Welfare conditionality within the social security system is largely ineffective in facilitating people's entry into or progression within the paid labour market over time. Stasis, a lack of significant and sustained change in employment status, is the most common outcome for the substantial majority across the repeat interviews.
- Recurrent short-term movements between various insecure jobs, interspersed with periods of unemployment, are routine among the minority who were able to obtain some paid work across the period. Occasional sustained movements, off welfare benefits and into work, are evident – but are extremely rare.
- For a substantial minority, welfare conditionality within social security regularly initiates and sustains a range of negative behaviour changes and outcomes including:
 - counterproductive compliance
 - disengagement from the social security system
 - increased poverty, and on occasions, destitution
 - movements into survival crime
 - exacerbated ill health and impairments.
- Behaviour change in respect of both movements off social security benefits and also the cessation of anti-social or problematic behaviour is complex and rarely linear. More often it is characterised by periods of progress and regression.
- There is little evidence that social tenants adjust their behaviour as a result of having a fixed-term rather than open-ended tenancy.
- Benefit sanctions do little to enhance people's motivation to prepare for, seek, or enter paid work. They routinely trigger profoundly negative personal, financial, health and behavioural outcomes and push some people away from collectivised welfare provisions.
- Within conditional welfare interventions the provision of appropriate and meaningful support, rather than sanction, is pivotal in triggering and sustaining both paid employment and positive change such as the reduction of anti-social or problematic behaviours.
- Although some examples of good practice are evident, much of the mandatory job search, training and employment support offered by Jobcentre Plus and external providers is too generic, of poor quality and largely ineffective in enabling people to enter and sustain paid work.
- The flexibilities or 'easements' designed to suspend or reduce the work search/job related conditions attached to an individual's benefit claim in recognition of particular circumstances (eg, homelessness, lone parenthood, illness), are not currently being routinely implemented.
- Respondents commonly endorse the broad principle of welfare conditionality and there was widespread support for policies that promote responsible behaviour, paid work and other social contributions (eg, informal care work). But whilst generally supportive of linking rights to responsibilities, people believe that in many cases welfare conditionality is being inappropriately implemented.
- The ethical legitimacy of welfare conditionality within current provision is further undermined by its ineffectiveness in helping people enter and maintain paid work that lifts them out of poverty. The intensification and extension of benefit sanctions is widely viewed as unjust.

www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk

Introduction

Welfare conditionality links eligibility for collectively provided welfare benefits and services to recipients' specified compulsory responsibilities or particular patterns of behaviour. It has been a key element of welfare state reform in many nations since the mid-1990s. The UK has been at the forefront of this behavioural policy turn. Conditional welfare arrangements, which combine engagement with mandatory support mechanisms with various sanctions for non-compliance, are now an established and accepted part of social security, housing, ASB and the criminal justice systems. The past two decades have seen sanctions-backed conditionality intensified ([Adcock and Kennedy, 2015](#)) and extended to encompass previous exempt groups such as disabled people, lone parents and, since 2013 under Universal Credit (UC), low paid workers and their partners ([Dwyer, 2016](#)).

Advocates who favour welfare conditionality believe that the use of sanctions and support is a fair and effective approach which will enable people to move off welfare benefits and into paid work and/or desist from anti-social or problematic behaviour. Conversely, critics argue that behavioural conditionality is largely ineffective in promoting paid employment and personal responsibility, unfair, and likely to exacerbate social exclusion among disadvantaged populations.

Findings

Effectiveness: welfare conditionality and movements from welfare to work

Welfare conditionality within the social security system was largely ineffective in moving respondents into employment or ensuring progression when in the paid labour market. Notably, stasis – a lack of significant, sustained change in employment status – was the most common outcome among those who took part in repeat interviews. Despite ongoing and often repeated applications for work, many respondents only managed to secure sporadic employment at various points within the two year period of the longitudinal interviews. Recurrent movements between one short-term, low-paid, insecure job and another; interspersed with periods when people returned to unemployment or incapacity benefits, as contracts ended or illness/impairment intervened, were the most typical pattern.

“ [At first interview]... [worked for] three weeks. It was part-time temporary work for over Christmas... I keep applying and I'm just unlucky at the moment... [At second interview]... I worked at [retailer] over the Christmas period this year... I keep looking for jobs... I've even applied to work on the bins... [At third interview]... I started work last year. I was in work for just under three months and I ended up with stress-induced blackouts... I had an interview last Thursday, although I didn't get the job.”

(UC RECIPIENT, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVES A-C)

“ [At second interview] Got employment with an old friend of mine... seasonal work from April to October... [At third interview] I'm out of work right now; that's due to two things, an accident and infection but I'm starting to look again for work on Monday.”

(UC RECIPIENT, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVES B-C)

Movements into sustained employment and progression within the workplace were very rare. In the exceptional cases where welfare conditionality played an important role in triggering a positive employment trajectory, appropriate, personalised, employment-focused support rather than sanctions can be clearly identified as of fundamental importance.

“ Being signed up with that [Work Programme provider] was a blessing in disguise... Initially, I just thought, oh, Jobcentre’s just trying to get rid of me... I felt listened to, I felt assisted... in my journey to get a job, and yet the sanctions were a total opposite, so definitely the support was much appreciated, was more useful... It got me the job.”

(MIGRANT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Respondents commonly regarded Jobcentres and Work Programme (WP) providers as being primarily focused on ensuring compliance with the mandatory benefit claim conditions rather than helping people into work. Pressure to achieve more demanding job application/work search requirements coupled with recipients’ strong desire to avoid the punitive effects of a sanction resulted in people applying for jobs they had no realistic chance of getting. Intensified welfare conditionality therefore encouraged a culture of counterproductive compliance and futile behaviour that got in the way of more effective attempts to secure employment.

“ My job was solely to prove to that woman [referring to Work Coach] that I had applied for so many jobs, and that was it... whatever jobs were available. Whether they were suitable for me, whether I was suitable for them, whatever, it didn’t matter.”

(UC RECIPIENT, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

“ All they cared about was, ‘Make sure you’ve got x amount of applications that you’ve applied for, that you can prove you’ve applied for, and that you’ve put it on Universal Jobmatch’.”

(OFFENDER, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C).

A minority learned the ‘rules of the game’ (Offender, Female, England, wave a) and altered their behaviour accordingly to become superficially compliant with compulsory work-related requirements whilst moving no closer to work. Others, particularly those who faced additional vulnerabilities such as homelessness and alcohol or drug dependency issues, reacted to the inherent hassle and compulsion of conditionality by withdrawing from the social security system altogether; in some cases triggering a move into survival crime.

“ Drug dealing. That’s what I did... That sanction... turned me to crime and making my money. And then after that I was making that much money I didn’t need their [benefit] money.”

(HOMELESS MAN, SCOTLAND, WAVE C)

Low paid workers who resented being subject to ‘in work’ conditionality regularly reacted in a similar fashion by relinquishing the housing-related and low wage supplements available through UC to avoid the necessity of compulsory additional job searches and attendance at work focused interviews.

“ Rang them up to say that I couldn’t come in because I was working full time. So they said that was all right. Then I got a letter saying I’d missed my interview and they’ve taken me off Universal Credit. So I thought, you know what, just stuff you. I can’t be bothered with them anymore. Mostly I’ve struggled because I just can’t be doing with them. Just going in there for them to look down at you... Basically, I’m living off 20 hours for the past couple of months and I’m paying full rent.”

(UC RECIPIENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

For a number of people, welfare conditionality triggered or exacerbated existing illnesses and impairments and decreased the likelihood of future return to work.

“ [At first interview] I went to hospital... The money doesn’t come because there’s something gone wrong on your claim, so you’ve got another month to wait... all these sort of like people in my life... it’s just overwhelming me... it’s making matters worse... [At second interview] ‘[Work Coach] I don’t want to phone you. I can see how ill you are’. I’m not fit to work then why am I talking to a job coach? It doesn’t make sense... [At third interview] Gradually got worse, and with my anxiety and depression, the stress of this Universal Credit, the stress of trying to get

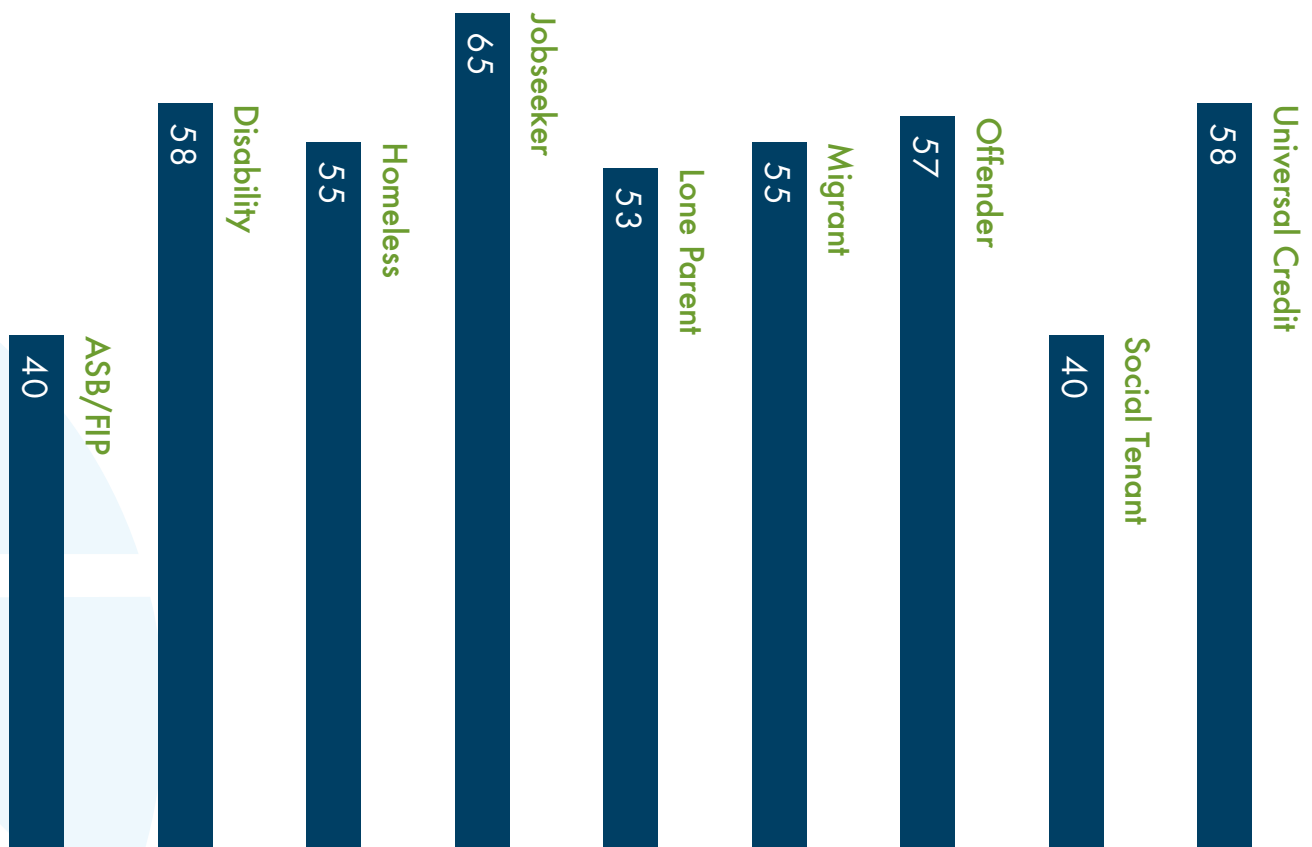
jobs, and just trying to function within a flat, I ran off to the woods at one point.”

(UC RECIPIENT, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVES A-C)

The efficacy of welfare conditionality in tackling anti-social and problematic behaviour

Outside the social security system conditionality is also a key element of interventions and legal/quasi-legal mechanisms which aim to tackle anti-social and problematic behaviour and reduce offending, for example via FIPs, enforcement approaches to combat rough sleeping and begging, Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, etc. Analysis of repeat interviews with

PRIMARY SAMPLING CHARACTERISTIC AT WAVE A



respondents recruited into the ASB/FIP, offenders and homeless people groups, many of whom simultaneously faced multiple difficulties (such as mental/physical health issues, alcohol or drug dependency, insecure accommodation), evidences a mixed picture in respect of the effectiveness of such interventions in changing behaviour.

During the period of the study, positive and significant behaviour change (including reductions in ASB and school truancy, better crisis management, improved parenting and enhanced self-confidence and health) were evidenced by the majority of respondents in the ASB/FIPs group; who routinely acknowledged a need for interventions to tackle ASB including their own.

“ We’ve achieved so much and I don’t think I would have got through it without them [project workers] coming and helping, I don’t know where I would have been if I didn’t get the help that I did get. Things could have come out a lot worse.”

(FEMALE, SUBJECT TO FIP, ENGLAND, WAVE C).

The intensive, holistic and personalised support made available through FIPs was directly linked to positive changes in behaviour and circumstances. However, the gains achieved were often subsequently undermined by welfare conditionality within a benefit system built around depersonalised sanctions and lacking support.

The use of enforcement measures did prompt some homeless people to discontinue harmful behaviours and/or engage with support. However, for others, enforcement displaced rough sleeping, begging and street drinking and caused those affected to disengage from support; and/or strengthened their resolve to continue participating in street culture.

“ We’ve all worked with people who it has helped... there’s been people who have been stopped from street drinking, from begging, and it has helped them in terms of their actual health and lifestyle that they go on to achieve.”

(FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER, HOMELESSNESS CHARITY)

“ I was begging in those days so it was ‘Get out of [borough] or we’ll give you an ASBO... I just moved to the other side of the water. I didn’t go far... I just moved area and when the same thing happened again just moved area.”

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

Among respondents dealing with complex life issues such as homelessness, substance misuse and involvement in street cultures, behaviour change was challenging and positive progress was rarely linear. Periods of improvement were often followed by regression into past routines. For some, conditionality and the threat or experience of enforcement measures were influential in decisions to discontinue problematic behaviour and/or engage more constructively with offers of support.

“ It was [helpful] in a way, yes. I think it was because it made me realise the way I was doing things wasn’t right because you’ve got to have a bit more respect for your neighbours.”

(MALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO ASBO, WAVE B)

However, sustained behaviour change was more likely to be founded upon respondents accessing stable accommodation and an array of support to deal with their vulnerabilities (such as poor health, addiction and homelessness). For others positive change was catalysed, at least in part, by personal crises such as deterioration in health or the feeling of having reached ‘rock bottom’. Individual decisions to make a step change in lifestyle, which on occasions incurred personal sacrifices, were highly significant in triggering and sustaining positive behaviour change. Rather than compulsion, the combination of personal commitment and the availability of appropriate

support were important factors in the long-term cessation of offending or ASB.

“I had to get rid of my wife, had to get rid of all my friends and start again.”

(OFFENDER, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE C).

“[I] just got to the point where I was sick of it. It’s shite, it’s shit life, horrible, it’s a nightmare, looking back, yes, I don’t know, I just wanted out of it, me, to be honest.”

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Within the criminal justice system, significant levels of recidivism highlight the limited success of sanctions based regimes in triggering positive behavioural change among offenders. Given this, the effectiveness of their extension within the social security system is further bought into question.

Conditionality, social housing and behaviour change

There is little evidence that welfare conditionality within social housing (for example, the use of fixed term or probationary tenancies linked to behavioural requirements) was effective in changing the behaviour of social tenants other than in relatively minor ways (such as, some may be less likely to invest in home improvements). There

was very little support for the notion that renewal of tenancies should be linked to job search or volunteering activities.

“I’m just the same... it hasn’t changed my behaviour to think I’ve got to behave a certain way because I don’t want my tenancy to be taken over.”

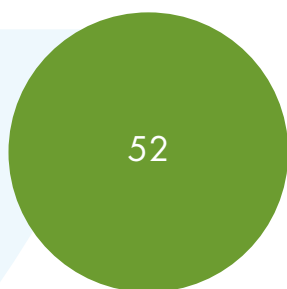
(SOCIAL TENANT, LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Routinely, tenants only had a vague understanding of the grounds upon which their fixed-term tenancies could potentially be terminated. The majority were only mildly anxious about their tenancy status. However, for a minority, mainly older tenants, those with disability or health issues or children, the lack of an open-ended tenancy was a cause of considerable distress.

“[With an open-ended tenancy] you know you have a place to be and it’s for life... Psychologically... I have my home, I’m here, unless something drastically – unless I can’t pay my rent or anything, no one is going to make me move... when you’re younger, you can see yourself moving... but as you get older, you need to be settled. Housing, a roof on top of your head, that should be something that really an older person doesn’t have to worry about.”

(SOCIAL TENANT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C).

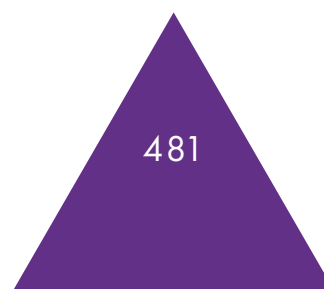
PARTICIPANTS



Policy Stakeholders (PS)



Focus Group Participants (FG)



Welfare Service Users (WSU)

Benefit sanctions

Benefit sanctions were ineffective in moving people nearer or into paid employment. They were routinely experienced as punitive and more likely to undermine the likelihood of engagement or advancement in paid work. In certain cases the experience of a benefit sanction led to individuals disengaging from the social security system.

“[Sanctions] didn’t encourage me to do anything. Discouraged me... I don’t think it really was positive or it’s not designed to be, is it? It’s a punishment, that’s what it is.”

(DISABLED MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

“I said to him [Work Coach], ‘I’m not going to argue with you and I’m trying my best,’... and with that I left the Jobcentre and I’ve not returned.”

(UC RECIPIENT, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE B)

It was extremely rare, indeed exceptional, for a respondent to report that the application of a benefit sanction helped trigger a movement into paid work. The standout example was a person, who was initially extremely angry and impoverished by a benefit sanction, but who subsequently commented about it having a positive employment related impact.

“[At first interview] I got sanctioned by the Jobcentre because I didn’t have a note from the hospital stating that I was in hospital after trying to take my life. They’re supposed to help people get work, but they don’t... [At third interview] Gave me the kick up the arse I needed to get a job... it made me more determined in finding a job working my arse off and being a better person than what the Jobcentre made me out to be.”

(UC RECIPIENT, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVES A-C)

The application of benefit sanctions universally triggered a range of profoundly negative outcomes, including increased debt, poverty and reliance on charitable providers and informal support networks in order to meet basic needs.

“[My gas and electric] fell into that much arrears... I was without heating for ages... I pawned everything I had... You’re literally going, ‘Do I eat or do I have light?’”

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

Respondents also frequently spoke of benefit sanctions, and their possible future application, exacerbating existing physical and mental illnesses and triggering high levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

“[Sanction] took me further down the depression route... suicidal thoughts... I’d rather starve than deal with this.”

(HOMELESS WOMAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

“I sunk into depression really because it felt all so stacked against me.”

(DISABLED WOMAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

“‘Do you have any jobs? Do you have anything?’... I can’t concentrate... I think like a crazy person. I can’t do anything. I can’t seem to quieten the madness.”

(FEMALE JOBSEEKER, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

Evidence suggests that benefit sanctions were often triggered for relatively minor transgressions such as being a couple of minutes late for a Jobcentre Plus appointment. On occasions benefit sanctions were clearly inappropriately applied in spite of an individual’s best efforts to avoid them.

“I had an appointment with them, I phoned them saying that I’ve got a problem... my brother who died in [location] and I’m there it’s the burial ceremony, you understand?... They said, ‘No don’t worry, if you come back, just call us back’, and then ten days, I phoned them back... They say, no, they have to send it to the decision board to see and then they send me a letter after saying that I have to be sanctioned... that wasn’t human.”

(MIGRANT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, UC RECIPIENT, WAVE C)

Support

Only a minority stated the mandatory support they received from Jobcentre Plus was enabling and of practical use in helping them find or maintain work. One person outlined how the training he had been sent on was instrumental in moving into employment. Another detailed how they had got a job within a day of phoning an employer listed on the Universal Jobmatch system. Several working on flexible contracts also commented that monthly variable UC payments were working well and that not having to constantly sign on and off benefit when their working week exceeded 16 hours (as was the case under JSA rules), was beneficial.

“[UC] got me the card, I did the training, and I did the test, and that was all free. Normally it would cost quite a bit of money to do all of that... and it’s got me into work... Literally, on the day after I received that card I was in work.”

(UC RECIPIENT, MALE ENGLAND, WAVE B)

However, the majority of respondents experienced their interactions with Work Coaches/advisers as being of limited use and/or coercive rather than supportive. The pressure to constantly search and apply for jobs, under threat of benefit sanction, yielded few positive work outcomes for many. Across all three waves of repeat interview the dominant view was that the provision of individualised support was largely lost in a process dominated by compliance monitoring. Few participants found the Universal Jobmatch website useful with complaints of out-of-date job listings, limited functionality or surveillance commonplace.

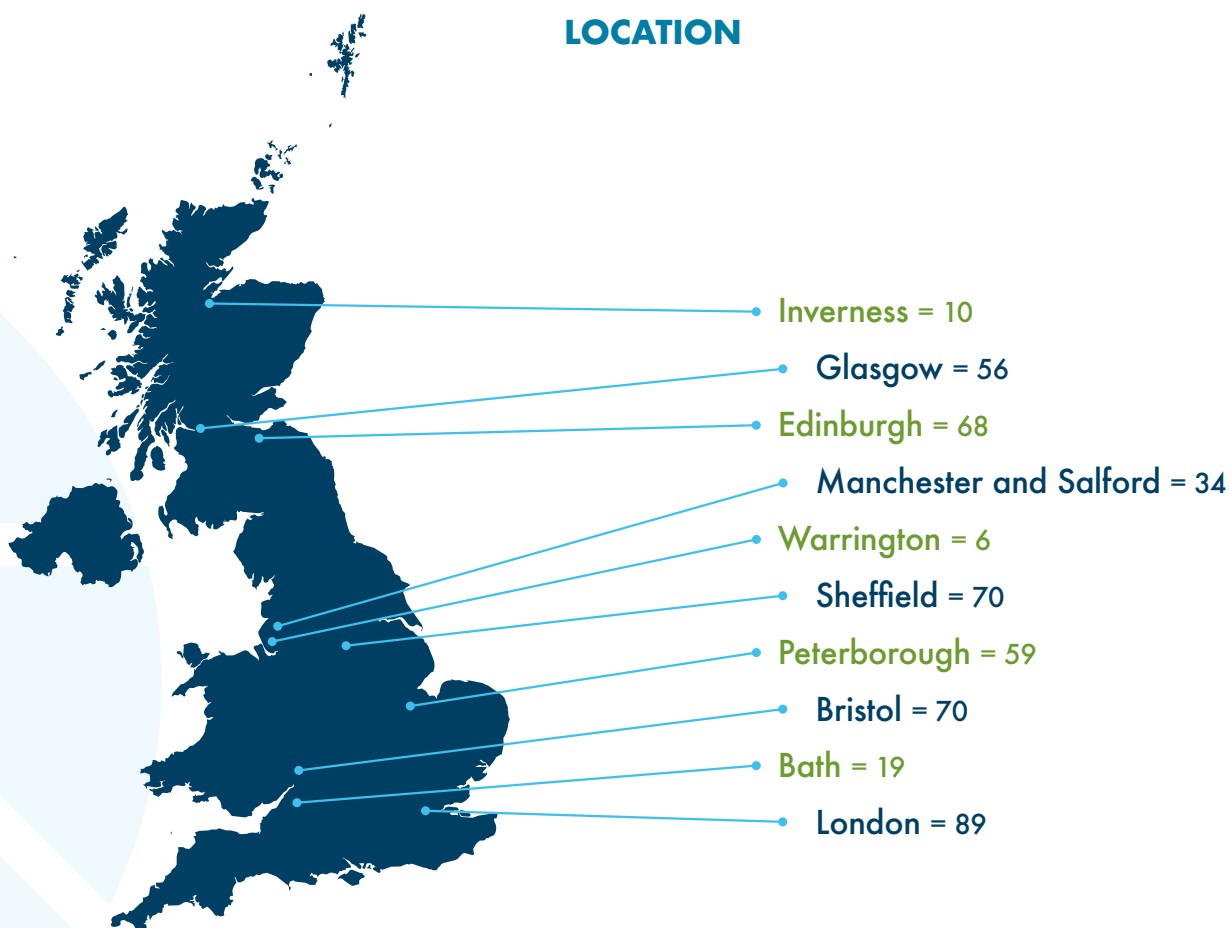
“Big brother is watching you! You’re getting spied on.”

(FEMALE, JOB SEEKER, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

“What helped me get a job had nothing to do with the jobcentre.”

(MIGRANT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

LOCATION



Additionally, most respondents did not think that the Claimant Commitment was explained adequately to them at their initial meeting. Discussions between Work Coaches and clients concerning conditions attached to claims were often cursory, with the process being routinely described by respondents as dominated by compulsion rather than negotiation.

“Yes, you had to sign it at the end but if you don’t sign it you don’t get your money. So you’ve got a choice, there is a choice... agree to this or bugger off, you’re not getting money.”

(UC RECIPIENT, MALE, SCOTLAND WAVE A)

‘Easements’ or flexibilities are another important element built into the current benefit system. These are intended to enable Work Coaches to suspend or reduce the job search and work related conditions attached to an individual’s benefit claim depending on their particular circumstances (for example, homelessness, lone parenthood, sickness). Easements should be discussed as part of the Claimant Commitment process. However, they are not currently being routinely discussed and/or appropriately implemented in all cases.

“They had an appointment for me at 3 o’clock and it was for an hour. I said ‘I can’t fulfil it; I’ve got a child’. ‘Oh, well, if you don’t come you won’t have your benefit’.”

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Much of the compulsory training on offer from Work Programme providers was condemned as being too generic, of poor quality and of limited use in improving people’s skills or enhancing future movements into work. Provision was regularly neither intensive or personally tailored, nor vocational enough to help people overcome the barriers they faced when trying to (re)engage with paid employment.

“You need more different support, and proper training in like bricklaying or something... not like what they do, like you go in a room and you do a CV.”

(OFFENDER, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

“A quiz, nothing to do with work... these teasers that you get in crackers... [or] ‘Right, you two, go on there and do some jobs.’ So we got on the computers... When you got there it was never, ‘Right, today we’re going to do.’ It was a question of ‘Oh my God, what am I going to do with these people’.”

(DISABLED WOMAN, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

Variations in how the mandatory support on offer was delivered by individual Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme staff were also significant in determining its effectiveness in triggering entry into employment. Similarly, discretion in how welfare conditionality is operationalised by individual staff members in their face-to-face dealings with benefit recipients was also an important factor in enabling even the most marginalised of people to take the first steps towards more fulfilling lives.

“[Of the Jobcentre adviser] After I’d lost everything I had to then sign on again. My adviser this time was absolutely fantastic. I couldn’t praise him up enough... I explained my situation. I said ‘look I’m a drug addict and I’m doing my best to get clean. I’m in recovery’ and he was just really supportive. He wasn’t on my case. He was encouraging; brilliant... He hasn’t just let me get away with it. He’s been ‘What about this training course? Go for that...’ He could have sanctioned me on numerous occasions.”

(DISABLED MAN, JSA/ESA RECIPIENT, ENGLAND, WAVE A).

With a previous long-term history of work, in late middle age, this respondent became addicted to drugs. His life entered into a downward spiral, he became homeless and lost his business and family. At his first wave interview he recounted how his recovery had been enabled by both the positive support of his particular Jobcentre Plus Work Coach (who had also advised and facilitated a move from JSA to ESA), alongside the non-statutory support offered by two homelessness organisations that had helped him overcome his addiction and then offered him voluntary work. At his third wave interview he

was living independently and had just started a permanent job in another city. Within conditional welfare interventions, personalised packages of support, rather than punitive sanctions, are the essential component required to initiate and sustain positive behaviour change.

Ethical debates

In principle, the majority of policy stakeholders, practitioners and welfare service users who took part in the interviews and focus groups that underpin this study are broadly supportive of welfare rights being linked to certain specified individual responsibilities.

“If you’re asking for something you’ve got to do something back in return. That’s just normal life – you don’t get owt for nowt.”

(DISABLED WOMAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Simultaneously, however, many are much more critical of the way in which welfare conditionality within the UK welfare state has been enacted and expanded. The most commonly held view was that the balance between sanctions and support was out of kilter.

“They’re looking for excuses to sanction you rather than give you a little bit of support.”

(OFFENDER, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE C)

“Telling people, ‘I’m going to sanction you because you haven’t done your job search properly, go away’. It’s not like, ‘I’m sanctioning you because you haven’t done your job search properly. This is how you’re meant to do it. This is what I want you to do. Do you need any support in place?’”

(MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

Many believed the relatively recent expansions and intensification of conditionality within the social security system to encompass: many disabled people (2007); low paid workers in receipt of in

work benefits under UC (2013); and increasing numbers of lone parents with children aged three or four (2017) to be unjust. Applying behavioural requirements to those who were incapable of work because of impairments, or who had sole caring responsibilities for young children, or who were already meeting their responsibility to work by engaging in part-time, low paid employment, was often seen as inappropriate and unjustifiable.

“[Sanctions are fair] where somebody who has no interest in getting a job and doesn’t make any effort to get a job... But I must say that they should never ever, ever, sanction a parent, because who are they hurting when they do that? It’s not the person that they want to get a job; it’s the children.”

(LONE PARENT, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE C)

“Some people are not well enough to work and they shouldn’t be forced into taking part in things that aren’t good for them. But I think it should be up to the individual; if people want to work they should be given the support.”

(DISABLED MAN, SCOTLAND, WAVE B)

Additionally, European Economic Area (EEA) nationals believed the recent restrictions (2014) on their benefit rights were discriminatory and unfair. They defended their claims on the basis of both EU citizenship and prior contribution through paid work.

“I’ve been here for 23 years and what happened... end of August, I received a letter from the DWP to say I’m not entitled to housing benefit, I’m not entitled to anything because I’m just passing by, you know, they took all my rights away.”

(EEA MIGRANT, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

Furthermore, the majority of social housing tenants also disapproved of the prospect that people’s fixed-term tenancies could be terminated on the grounds of a rise in income, and only a small minority saw the idea of income related rents in social housing (sometimes called ‘pay to stay’) as fair.

“I think there should be more social housing, because if you work very hard and to better yourself, why should you be removed from your home?... So, I think there should be more [house] building instead of penalising people because they are better off.”

(SOCIAL TENANT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

There was likewise very little support for the notion that renewal of tenancies should be linked to job search or volunteering activities, and even some shock that such a proposition should be entertained.

“I just don’t agree with forcing people into volunteering, I think especially volunteering for jobs and things like that, I don’t really think it’s the landlord’s place or anything to do with your tenancy.”

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Concerns about the ongoing administration and implementation of welfare conditionality leading to inappropriate decisions and outcomes were also widely expressed across the study. For example, a policy stakeholder compared the process of undergoing a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) to the production of processed meat. They commented on how the extension of conditionality to incapacity benefits had led to some people with severe impairments being subject to unacceptable benefit sanctions despite obviously being unfit for paid employment.

“Totally incapacitated due to an accident at work... didn’t turn up to his interview... ended up being sanctioned for six months... he’d gone into the “sausage machine”.”

(FORMER GOVERNMENT MINISTER)

For many, the ethical legitimacy of welfare conditionality within current UK welfare provision was further undermined by its ineffectiveness in helping people enter and maintain paid work, the sometimes punitive impacts, and/or an inability to address the problems underlying anti-social behaviour or unemployment.

“They’re doing nothing to help me at all apart from sending me on stupid courses which are absolutely a waste of time but it ticks their box. Yes, this man has been unemployed for the last six months, you’ll say, ‘We’ll send him on this course’. It comes back, nothing happening, send him another course.”

(MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

“By giving me that ASBO it wasn’t solving the problem; it was just moving me on somewhere else. The problem being moving on to somewhere else, there was no support around that ASBO or anything to try and help me resolve the problem of being homeless.”

(FEMALE, SUBJECT TO ASBO, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

“What hasn’t helped me... bullying and sanctioning me and making me sign on every day. That had a really bad impact on me. I just had a breakdown.”

(OFFENDER, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

NOTE ON METHODS

Service user respondents were interviewed up to three times at on average twelve month intervals across a two year period, between 2014 and 2017. Of the 481 interviewed at wave a, 339 were interviewed again at wave b and 262 again at wave c. The qualitative longitudinal analysis is therefore based on data from 339 respondents who were interviewed on two or three occasions.

Interviews were conducted in 10 locations: Bath, Bristol, Edinburgh, Greater Glasgow, Inverness, London, Greater Manchester and Salford, Peterborough, Sheffield and Warrington. Numbers were as shown on the map in this briefing. About half of the service user interviewees were female. Roughly one fifth of interviewees were from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) groups.

Recommendations

- As a minimum, welfare conditionality within the social security system needs to be rebalanced. The current preoccupation with sanctions backed compliance needs to be urgently reconsidered with more emphasis and resources focused on the provision of personalised employment support.
- There is a need for a widespread review of the benefit sanctions system to reduce the severity of sanctions, introduce clear and adequate warnings, improve communication with recipients, and to ensure that sanctions are not applied to vulnerable people.
- Variations and inconsistencies in implementation of easements need to be addressed. The DWP needs to ensure that Work Coaches are provided with appropriate training and time with each benefit recipient to agree, and review over time, adjustments in mandatory work preparation or job search requirements appropriate to each individual's personal and changing circumstances.
- The quality of the mandatory job search support and employment and skills training provided by Jobcentre Plus and external providers needs to be significantly improved. It should be more vocational, flexibly implemented and tailored to individuals' needs.
- Within social housing the FTTs policy framework should be abandoned. It has no discernible positive impact on tenant behaviour, nor is it likely to generate substantial additional lettings for households in need.
- More generally, in light of the growing body of evidence on the ineffectiveness of the intensified and extended system of welfare conditionality in moving people off social security benefits and into work, it is time for a comprehensive review of its continued use.
- The wider application of welfare conditionality within the benefit system for disabled people, those dealing with additional issues such as homelessness and alcohol or drug dependency, and for in work UC recipients, should be paused forthwith pending a more fundamental enquiry into its ethicality and usefulness for these groups.

This briefing was written by Professor Peter Dwyer and edited by Dr Janis Bright, University of York. It draws on and synthesises nine specific final findings papers written by the wider project team:

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Other briefings in this series and full list of references can be found at www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications. Data from the study will be available from 2019 at www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk.