

Final findings: Jobseekers

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This final report presents the key findings for the jobseeker sample of the Welfare Conditionality project. These findings draw directly on the experiences of 43 jobseekers (from an original sample of 65) who took part in at least two of the three waves of repeat interviews, undertaken between 2014 and 2017. Jobseekers were sampled as part of the larger repeat qualitative longitudinal panel study that informs the project alongside additional interviews and focus groups conducted with relevant policy stakeholders and practitioners.



Key findings

- Overall, welfare conditionality (in the form of benefit sanctions and mandatory appointments at Jobcentre Plus and contracted-out back-to-work agencies) did not prompt 'behaviour change'.
- Benefit sanctions, and the threat of them, resulted overwhelmingly in negative impacts. Many participants reported that fear of being sanctioned was counterproductive and that it prioritised compliance with meaningless activities that were ineffective for finding work.
- Jobcentre Plus offices were not regarded as being places of support and were described in largely negative terms. Yet even small gestures of empathy were appreciated by jobseekers and could dispel the prevalent sense of being treated impersonally.
- Mandatory support was often experienced as offering a low quality of service, involving access to facilities to monitor self-directed job search activity or basic and repetitive instructions. Several interviewees were sent on the same course multiple times.
- Whilst most jobseekers agreed that recipients who are capable of work should be expected to seek work actively as a condition of receiving their benefits, they felt a powerful sense of injustice at the way job search conditions were implemented in their own case, particularly if they had received a disproportionate or unjust sanction.
- Broadly, it was felt that there was an imbalance between the paucity of support provided and the looming threat of sanctions. Participants who had experienced a sanction noted there was a lack of clarity or warning that their behaviour was sanctionable, that work coaches were too quick to resort to the use of a sanction, and that sanctions were disproportionate to the alleged transgression.

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Introduction

Discussions in this briefing focus on three key themes. First, the effectiveness of welfare conditionality in bringing about behaviour change, specifically in relation to paid work. Second, how welfare conditionality is experienced; in particular, to understand the varied impacts of the sanctions and mandatory support inherent in conditional welfare benefits and services on people's lives. Third, ethical debates about the fairness, or otherwise, of linking collective rights to welfare to specific individual behavioural responsibilities.

Context

Social security benefits for unemployed people in the UK have always required recipients to look for work as a condition of receiving benefit payments. Within recent decades, however, there has been an extension and intensification of conditionality for jobseekers. Proponents of welfare conditionality have viewed 'benefit dependency' as a principal explanatory factor for understanding unemployment. This has resulted in 'activation' based policies that intervene and structure welfare provision around behavioural requirements, such as job search targets and mandatory work activity. Overall, there has been a de-emphasis on the entitlement of recipients to welfare, and a rising dominance of a contractual ideology – with its prioritising of individual responsibility and reciprocity. This changing emphasis can be seen in the replacement of Unemployment Benefit with Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) in 1996, with the name of the benefit conferring the status and expectations of the recipient ([Fletcher and Wright, 2017](#)).

Criticism of these policies sees the attention given to behavioural requirements as having been at the expense of demand-side policies and economic interventions to increase employment. Additionally, there has been a concern that the narrative of benefit dependency and policy measures introduced to tackle it has fostered stigmatisation of benefit recipients by laying blame on perceived individual failings. The sanctions regime as well, and the escalation in the length of a sanction for repeat transgressions, has been criticised as overly punitive.

Findings

Behaviour change

A core justification for increasing conditionality for JSA recipients was that it would lead to positive behaviour change and move jobseekers closer to the labour market. However, the jobseekers in our study were already keen to work and did not require the threat of sanction to encourage job search or work preparation. Participants frequently and strongly expressed their desire to find work, but identified a range of tangible barriers to employment including, few jobs being available locally, mismatches between skills and vacancies, the unsuitability of low wage and insecure work, lack of qualifications and training certificates, and lack of computer access or experience using computers. Some jobseekers also felt that employers preferred younger workers, who were cheaper to employ. Overall, across the three waves of interviews there was relatively little change over time, with barriers to work and experiences of services remaining relatively consistent. Only 18 of the 43 participants reported being employed at the time of one or more of the interviews.

There were a small number of reports that experiences of sanctions or threats to refer a person for a sanction resulted in higher compliance with conditionality. The majority of participants reported that, given their existing strong desire to find work, there was no need for the level of scrutiny they faced or to be threatened with sanctions. Many participants felt there was little to no recognition given to their efforts to find work or previous time in employment, and became frustrated, angry, and stressed by the pressure of conditionality. A few participants with pre-existing disabilities reported the stress from conditionality had pushed them to apply for disability benefits. Often compliance with conditionality did not reassure participants, who remained anxious and stressed:

“ I do everything they ask me to do. But towards the signing on dates, particularly the night before, you’re anxious because you wonder not what you’ve done, it’s what you haven’t done. That’s the psychological pressure. And as you well know, stress is a health problem.”

(MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

These situations where participants did their utmost to comply with conditionality had no discernible impact on their employment prospects. Participants reported this as eroding their confidence and motivation, especially when few employers responded to job applications. Participants also felt pushed into applying for unsuitable jobs. This unrelenting pressure to achieve inflexible jobseeking targets for any type of job also resulted in people applying for jobs they felt they had little to no chance of getting. Many research participants attributed this progress directly to these supportive interventions:

“ What I had to try and do is, I was applying for jobs that I was interested in but I was also applying for jobs that I knew I wasn’t going to get but just to keep them happy. As long as they could see I was looking for work, they were happy with that.”

(MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

There was a general anxiety that targets were not always achievable, but nevertheless the risk of being sanctioned remained constant. For many participants, across the waves of research interviews, there was a high level of anxiety expressed that, often in combination with prior experiences of being sanctioned, led to hypervigilance. This could take the form of applying for unsuitable jobs, turning up to meetings extra early, and meticulously filling in job logs, where compliance with conditionality requirements replaced meaningful job search activities:

“ Because I know if I didn’t do it that they’ll stop my money and I’ll not have any Housing Benefit paid and I’ll have debt letters from the council saying I’m in hundreds of pounds of debts. That makes me really anxious and that. I can hardly sleep as it is, so.”

(FEMALE JOBSEEKER, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

Efficacy of welfare conditionality

SUPPORT

Lack of support at Jobcentre Plus offices was a common theme across all three waves of the jobseeker interviews. For many there was a sense that work coaches, and more broadly policymakers, held a pejorative view of recipients and that there was an over-emphasis on sanctions. Jobseekers consistently reported feeling powerless and stigmatised.

“ No, [Jobcentre Plus is not encouraging] at all. They just basically say, ‘Right, here’s your book, get it done. If you don’t; I’ll sanction you.’”

(FEMALE JOBSEEKER, SCOTLAND, WAVE B)

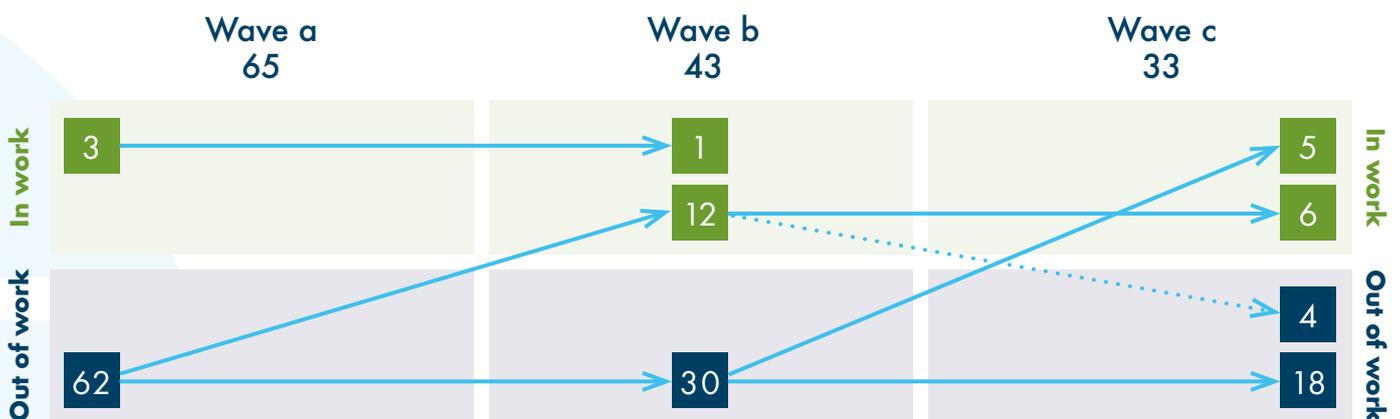
The Claimant Commitment was seen by a small number of participants as useful in clarifying what was expected of them. However, most jobseekers did not think it was explained adequately. There was a power dynamic between work coaches and recipients, which, along with time limitations, meant there was little opportunity to discuss how to tailor their commitments to their situation. Similarly, throughout the study only a few participants found the Universal Jobmatch website useful; most found it unfit for purpose, with complaints about out-of-date job listings, fake vacancies, and limited functionality. Several of the jobseekers we interviewed were concerned about the surveillance of their job search activity via Universal Jobmatch.

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

(FEMALE JOBSEEKER, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

In all three waves of the study, participants felt there was too great an emphasis on target setting and the threat and application of sanctions at the expense of individualised support. Where work coaches were viewed positively, it was because they took the time to get to know recipients and show basic courtesy in asking how they were doing at the start

JOBSEEKERS SAMPLE: work trajectories



Note: 22 left the study at Wave b, 10 left the study at Wave c

Note: This simplified graphic represents participants’ work status at the point of interview and does not capture the various movements by participants into and out of work between interview waves. Nor does it capture complexities such as movement into/out of self employment, short and variable hours or zero hours contracts.

of a meeting. The same empathetic and humanising aspects of interaction were important to those attending mandatory courses or Work Programme (WP) placements:

“ Well, I think the Work Programme understands my needs a lot more than the Jobcentre does... they took their time to get to know me, what my strengths and what my weaknesses are, what my concerns are, what’s my ideal job, everything like this. Jobcentre, I fill out forms, and then it’s like, ‘All right, we’ll see you in two weeks’, and it’s like, ‘oh, okay, is that it?’ ”

(MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

A crucial additional feature that influenced experiences of mandatory courses or WP placements was whether participants felt the provision improved their job prospects. Indeed, participants without their own computers or with IT literacy issues reported willing engagement with job clubs without any conditional requirements. Whilst initial computing courses for those with no prior experience tended to be viewed positively, being sent repeatedly on similar courses or on placements that involved little more than being monitored applying for jobs in the provider’s offices were criticised. Many jobseekers wanted more meaningful support to find work.

“ It is [frustrating], especially when you’ve been on long-term unemployed, 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)

Work coaches also had discretion to vary conditionality requirements and some interviewees had to attend Jobcentre Plus daily to maintain their eligibility, often after a WP placement. Interviewees found this unhelpful, stressful and degrading:

“ Again, for me personally, it was having a horrible effect on myself going down there every day... it was demeaning. It’s like it wasn’t just you’re coming down every day to find a job... it was like I was trying to prove, almost prove my worth for life.”

(FEMALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

SANCTIONS

Slightly over half of the jobseeker participants had experienced one or more benefit sanctions across the three waves of interviews. Most disagreed with the decisions to sanction them. Participants criticised the application of sanctions for minor transgressions such as being a couple of minutes late to an appointment, or being sanctioned with no clear warning that they could be sanctioned for that reason. Some participants also reported inconsistency between work coaches, resulting in unexpected sanctioning (or threats of sanction) when a stand-in work coach had different expectations from their usual work coach. This highlights the role of discretion in the system and the variability of what might be considered as reasonable.

“ I’ve never been sanctioned for a fair reason.”

(MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Sanctions were overwhelmingly reported to have negative impacts, particularly in terms of causing material hardship with participants mounting up rent arrears and debts, turning to foodbanks, and having to borrow from friends and family, creating further anxiety for how they would manage to pay them back. One participant lost his home as a result of a JSA sanction.

In a minority of cases, sanctions resulted in self-reported increases in compliance with behaviour requirements. It was much more common for sanctions to cause negative emotional outcomes such as anger, depression, and stress.

“ I feel angry all the time and just not feeling happy... When I go on the road I look for any shop, anything; I’m calling them and asking about a job, ‘Do you have any jobs? Do you have anything?’ ... I can’t concentrate... I feel like I can’t think, I don’t have any idea in my mind. I think like a crazy person. I can’t do anything. I can’t seem to quieten the madness.”

(FEMALE JOBSEEKER, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

Furthermore, the stress and material hardship caused by sanctions were perceived as undermining the ability to look for work both during and after the sanction:

“ What, by sanctioning me and cutting down on my money obviously leaves me less money to live on and if I’ve got less money to live on I can’t go for these job interviews, I can’t put credit on my phone to phone for jobs.”

(MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

There was a reduction in the number of sanctions experienced over time. Of those interviewed at least twice, at wave a 21 participants reported having experienced a sanction, 10 of whom experienced their latest sanction within the preceding 12 months. However, at both wave b and wave c only four participants per wave reported experiencing a sanction since their previous interview. While for a few participants this reduction came about due to them having greater awareness of what they needed to do to avoid a sanction, overall this reduction corresponds with national JSA sanctioning rates over the period of the research (NAO, 2016; Webster, 2017). Despite sanctions becoming less frequent, many participants remained anxious about the possibility of being sanctioned:

Ethics

Most jobseekers were sympathetic to the principle of social security benefits being conditional on behavioural requirements. However, this view often contrasted with personal experiences of being sanctioned in circumstances that they viewed as unfair. Their defence of conditionality in principle centred on an acceptance that it was necessary to prevent undue abuse of the system. The issue was how this principle had been put in practice, with the wrong people being unjustly targeted.

“ Like I said, I can understand there are people out there that just couldn’t give a crap about getting a job and whatnot but I think people at the Jobcentre are thinking that that is everyone that walks into the Jobcentre and it’s not fair because most of us, it’s not.”

(FEMALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

This feeling that recipients were all treated as potential scroungers, combined with the constant conditional requirements, gave rise to a sense amongst participants that there was no individual tailoring of service provision and they were “just a number” (Jobseeker, England). Furthermore, participants argued there was no sense of proportionality or reasonableness within the system, where minor transgressions resulted in swift and severe penalties with little to no warning and insufficient opportunity for people to provide any counter evidence. Jobseekers often proposed using a warning system or an alternative system of lesser fines rather than sanctioning the whole benefit payment.

“ I do reckon there should be some warnings, like even if they send you a letter saying, ‘You are on your first warning’, I still reckon there should be a three-strike thing before you get sanctioned.”

(MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

The general lack of support to enable finding work was also perceived as making the use of sanctions disproportionate:

“ You’re 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 help?”

(MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

Several jobseekers were opposed to sanctioning. They viewed sanctions as an inappropriate mechanism for changing people’s behaviour, or felt that they should only be retained as a final resort after all other options had been exhausted. Rather than changing behaviour, they argued that sanctions resulted in hardship and demotivation that is counterproductive to the stated aims.

“ I just think it’s all wrong that if you get your welfare taken off you, because you need money to survive. I mean, it’s just horrible to think that people could actually have no money for a certain amount of time.”

(FEMALE JOBSEEKER, SCOTLAND, WAVE C)

NOTE ON METHODS

The original 65 jobseeker participants (41 men and 24 women) were sampled as recipients of JSA. They were sampled in a range of locations (Edinburgh, Peterborough, Sheffield, Bristol, London, and Glasgow). This briefing examines the experiences of the 43 interviewees who took part in follow-up interviews (43 interviewed twice, 33 interviewed three times), 17 of whom were engaged in paid work at the time of one of the waves, and 24 of whom reported having received one or more benefit sanctions.

Conclusions

The analysis of longitudinal interviews with jobseeker participants found a lack of evidence for the effectiveness of welfare conditionality in facilitating behaviour change and improvement outcomes in terms of returning to paid employment. Conditionality, especially through the focus placed on sanctions, instilled fear into participants due to the severe material hardship arising from non-compliance. However, rather than promoting what could be considered ‘positive behaviour change’, this fear, at best, prompted changes in behaviour that ensured compliance with empty conditionality requirements, sometimes at the expense of more meaningful efforts to improve job prospects. At worst, experiencing sanctions sparked an all-consuming crisis and fight for survival. Often, fear of sanctions provoked unnecessary anxiety and depression and at worst a hypervigilance provoked by anxiety over being sanctioned.

Participants repeatedly emphasised there was no need to change their behaviour and that they had an ardent desire to work. Jobseekers felt that the imbalance between support and sanctions ignored the reality of the contemporary labour market and failed to address their support needs that would help them return to employment. It was not always clear to participants what behaviour would result in a sanction, as well as there being different standards enforced by work coaches. Furthermore, it was felt that the severe material hardship resulting from a benefit sanction decision was grossly disproportionate to alleged transgressions. Overall, there was a sense that there was a bureaucratic and target driven model of service provision that devalued individualised approaches.

Key policy recommendations

- A rebalance should be sought between the threat of sanctions and the provision of support. High quality support and training should be provided to enable more meaningful engagement with jobseekers who are keen to find and retain paid work.
- The environment of Jobcentre Plus needs to be reviewed. Sufficient time should be incorporated into meetings to allow work coaches to provide individualised support.
- Referral to courses and back-to-work support needs to offer clear advantages to the recipient, and avoid repeat referrals to similar basic courses. Consideration should also be given by the UK Government to follow the Scottish Government in removing conditionality from the Work and Health Programme.
- The time spent making a claim should be used to assess at regular intervals whether adequate support is in place, and not used primarily to trigger automatic referrals to mandatory support. Particularly, triggering the intensification of conditionality, such as moving to a period of daily sign-ons at the end of a WP placement, should be halted where there is no evidence of effectiveness.
- Universal Jobmatch should be designed to enabled effective job outcomes, rather than to facilitate sanctions.
- There is a need for a widespread review of the current sanctions system to alter the severity of sanctions, introduce clear and adequate warning, improve communication with recipients, and to ensure that sanctions are not applied to households where children, ill or disabled people will be impacted detrimentally.

This briefing was written by Dr Alasdair BR Stewart and Dr Sharon Wright, University of Glasgow.



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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.

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