



Employment support that works: the importance of relationships, flexibility and removing barriers

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Summary

While the UK labour market boasts [low unemployment rates](#), underlying issues such as growing inactivity and enduring [high levels of insecure work](#) rightly raise concerns. This rapid response briefing shares findings from the Changing Realities research programme, which works in partnership with over 100 parents and carers living on a low income from across the UK. We share policy recommendations for the DWP and Jobcentre Plus which taken together emphasise the need for urgent improvements to the adequacy of social security payments, and the abolition of punitive, inefficient, and ineffective forms of behavioural conditionality.

We set out six co-produced recommendations for change, developed in collaboration with parents and carers on low incomes. Together, these have the potential to make employment support more effective for everyone. If this six point plan were to be implemented, social security would be improved for everyone, with a significant improvement to employment support and relationships with the DWP/DfC. This work is pressing and much needed. It is work that can and should be done now.

We recommend the following changes

1

Improving the adequacy of the social security system

We cannot improve employment support without addressing the inadequacy of social security support. Benefit levels need to be increased and there is a need to reintroduce the additional element for Limited Capability for Work, and provide financial hardship support. The five-week wait for Universal Credit should go, as should the two-child limit and the benefit cap.

2

Transform Universal Credit to make it fit for purpose

To make UC fit for purpose, the DWP should create more flexible assessment periods capable of providing stable incomes for claimants. We propose longer fixed awards as the default, and a shift in childcare support from UC to more stable and extended assistance. Work incentives should be increased and the taper rate should be reduced further. Support through UC should also include help with internet access and the funding of necessary equipment through the flexible support fund.

3**Remove the threat of sanctions**

Abandon punitive conditionality. The focus should shift to support, empowering individuals to find meaningful work that aligns with their aspirations to secure long-term, employment.

4**A consistent work coach**

Claimants should be entitled to a consistent work coach at the Jobcentre. Improve frontline training of work coaches to provide flexible, individual-focused support and enhance awareness of available services and programmes.

5**Create a statement of claimant rights**

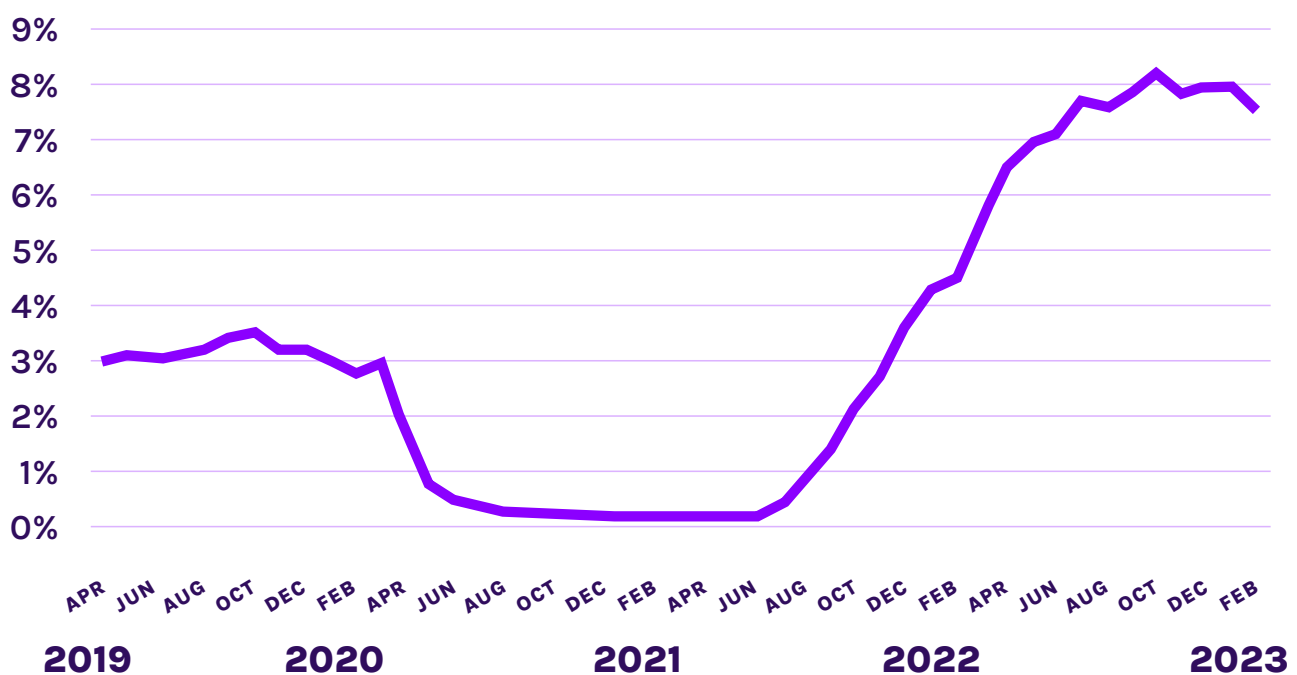
Currently, complex procedures overshadow claimants' entitlements. Implementing a 'Claimant Commitment'-like statement of rights, which sets out the rights of claimants themselves would strengthen accountability and improve claimant-work coach relations. Similarly, an external accountability mechanism would further address power imbalances.

6**Improved access to skills/training through JCP**

The JCP should prioritise holistic work approaches, considering individual skills and career goals, shifting decisively away from a 'work-first' approach. The JCP needs to recognise the value of voluntary work, and make this possible as part of work-related activity. Make available job-relevant training and person-centred courses that improve employability in sectors beyond the traditional ones.

Introduction

Mainstream employment support services are delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) through its network of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) offices, which also play a key role in the administration of Universal Credit (UC), and of legacy benefits such as Income Support (IS), Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). In Northern Ireland, this support is provided by the Department for Communities (DfC) through its network of Jobs and Benefit Offices. Eligibility for employment support from the DWP varies, but generally requires a person to be actively seeking work, meet certain age requirements, have limited income or savings, and in some cases, have disabilities or health conditions that impact their ability to work. [Sanctioning](#) is an ever present penalty for people who are deemed to have violated conditions or requirements of their benefits. The latest 2023 [data](#) shows that around 1 in 12 (7%) people in the full work-search group are subject to sanction on Universal Credit, compared to around 1 in 30 (3%) at any one time pre-pandemic. Sanction rates have more than doubled in the planning and preparing for work group since pre-pandemic, though remain lower overall than in the intensive work search group.



Source DWP Stat Xplore Sanction Rate dataset

Previous analysis has shown that men, and young men in particular, are at the highest risk of sanction – and that there is large variation in the sanction rate across Jobcentres, which cannot be explained by the make-up of the people claiming in the Jobcentre alone. This suggests that people’s experiences vary tremendously across Jobcentres and that there is a lack of consistency of [approach](#), with those in some areas having a much higher likelihood of being sanctioned than others. It is also important to recognise that the impact of the conditionality and sanctions regime extends well beyond those on whom sanctions are ultimately applied. The [threat of sanctions](#) exists for everyone required to undertake some form of ‘work-related activity’, an estimated 2.7 million people in the latest data including over 800,000 in work. In this context, the uncertainty and anxiety introduced by the conditionality regime is further exacerbated by its inconsistent application.

Our evidence in this briefing is based upon written responses from the [Changing Realities](#) research programme, which works in partnership with over 100 parents and carers living on a low income to document everyday life, and collaboratively develops recommendations for change. In this rapid response briefing we focus on people’s experiences of employment support and set out co-produced recommendations for improving relationships with the DWP/DfC. The responses in this briefing are from questions we posed in March and April 2023. These questions were centred around people’s experiences of the DWP, the help and support people have (or have not) received applying for benefits, and relationships with paid employment. Additionally, we include transcriptions of spoken testimony and individual diary entries drawn from over 1200 such entries collected since data collection began in September 2022. The participants include people from across the UK, spanning full-time workers, part-time workers, active job seekers, and individuals not working due to health and/or disability.

Our recommendations were co-produced during an online discussion group session (what we call our ‘big ideas meetings’), which involved a merging of different forms of expertise. A big ideas session in May 2023 focused on imagining better employment support and improving relationships between claimants and frontline workers at the DWP and Department for Communities. The discussion was facilitated by the project team, which includes representatives from Child Poverty Action

Group and our briefing partner the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). The recommendations for change are based on this discussion and are the product of collaboration between people with expertise by experience and people with policy, campaigning and academic expertise.

Experiences of Employment Support

1.1 “I dread going to the Jobcentre”: first impressions count

Public employment support in the UK is restricted to people claiming benefits. People’s experiences of public employment support are thus shaped by the broader context of claiming out of work benefits from the DWP, and in Northern Ireland from the Department for Communities (DfC). A number of different factors contribute to poor first impressions and negative overall experiences of the DWP. The extremely low income level at which benefits are set, and the significant hardships and challenges this creates, sends a clear message that claimants are neither respected or valued.

Even before they have engaged with employment support, claimants have often formed the impression that the DWP regards them as a problem to be managed, rather than as people with needs and aspirations. As Mollie U, a parent who receives Universal Credit (UC), Carer’s Allowance, and Child Benefit, told us, ‘The way I’m made to feel when I walk in through the doors is like I’m worthless and my opinions don’t matter.’

It is well [established](#) that the experience of claiming benefits is characterised by feelings of shame and stigma; and these feelings are reinforced rather than assuaged by encounters in Jobcentre Plus offices. Dotty G, a lone parent who receives UC, Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Tax Credits, and Child Benefit, described how she avoided the Jobcentre unless it was...

...‘an emergency situation regarding my payments... because, as soon as you get to the door of a Jobcentre, you’re immediately met by security guards, which is really intimidating’ – **Dotty G.**

Dotty G's description of being greeted by security guards draws attention to a pervasive experience of being treated with suspicion. From this, many claimants draw the conclusion that the Jobcentre is more invested in policing claims than in helping them with their problems.

Although this is not always the case, Changing Realities participants often describe their relationship with DWP/Jobcentre Plus in adversarial terms, characterised by hostility rather than support or care. For example, Beverly W, a disabled lone parent who receives UC told us:

I consider myself very lucky not to have the need for regular contact with the DWP or jobcentre staff. I appreciate the fact that these civil servants are mostly human beings themselves, trying to do their jobs, nevertheless, I also often question how some of them actually even sleep at night, given what they subject people to when they enforce regulations on their fellow beings. - **Beverly W**

The difficulty and bureaucratic complexity of claiming benefits also contributes to a perception that the DWP/Jobcentre is not primarily concerned with providing help. People taking part in Changing Realities described encountering numerous obstacles to successful navigation of the benefits application process, in which they felt unsupported by the DWP/Jobcentre.

I've had no support in applying for benefits. I registered for Job Seekers Allowance/ Universal Credit myself and also chased the council to register for free school meals and sort my council tax benefit... I have no idea if I am entitled to anything else... It's frustrating as I feel so alone and don't know anyone else in a similar situation to ask. - **Jenny D**

The inference that participants commonly draw from these experiences is that the DWP/Jobcentre is primarily concerned with gatekeeping, and is at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile to their needs and interests.

1.2 “Her response was gold”: how relationships matter

Negative experiences notwithstanding, people sometimes reported good relationships with individual work coaches. The quality of their relationships with work coaches had a significant impact on participants’ overall experience of employment support. For example, Dotty R, a lone parent who works full time and receives PIP and Child Tax Credits told us:

I don’t have regular contact with the DWP, but the thought of it fills me with fear as they don’t get a good rep’. It’s a shame ‘cause I did have regular contact when my son was younger with someone who specifically supported single parents and she was fab but I felt that was an exception rather than the rule.

– **Dotty R**

Dotty’s point underlines the significance of specific, one to one relationships. Similarly, Precious D, a lone parent who works full time and receives UC and Child Benefit, described being “surprised” by her encounter with a kind and understanding work coach:

Two work coaches (out of three) that I have had some interaction with did not show any understanding of my personal circumstances [a lone parent of five young children and a domestic violence survivor] but were acting in a pressurising manner. I felt kind of intimidated and scared. These are both female and male.

Last year I met another work coach – she did display empathy and kindness. I was surprised. – **Precious D**

For Precious D, as for others, good work coaches are those who take the time to get to know people, and who demonstrate flexibility, understanding, and empathy. Sal E similarly shared experiences of receiving positive support from her work coach. This was an experience in which she was listened to and felt understood. In Sal’s case, her advisor’s flexibility and willingness to relax some of the systemic pressures she faced (to find work) were the key to Sal accessing other appropriate support and services:

I talked freely about my difficulties [with my work coach] in managing my situation. I was depressed, anxious, damaged from not being able to help my children and I mentioned that I was being officially re-assessed as an autistic adult - her response was gold. She replied that her sister had recently been assessed as ADHD with autism tendencies. We both cried. My work coach told me that the assessment, whatever the outcome, would lead onto some access to work, practical help and support... Would I have found this help without the job coach? No. I would not. My work coach gave me help by relieving me of the 'system expectations' and being helpful. - **Sal E**

Interpersonal relationships with work coaches matter to participants because they are the foundations on which meaningful support is based. Relationships based on understanding and trust allow for the honest appraisal of peoples' needs and the problems they face.

Relationships with individual work coaches had an important influence on participants' experiences of and engagement with employment support. Kindness, respect, and understanding were among the most valued attributes of the relationship, but these were often the exception rather than the rule, as Libby N described:

Maybe right time right place, as my coach has been invaluable to me. She makes sure that I know my journey is one that is worth fighting for, whether it is my job search or fighting rent-related issues with the council. Her compassion might be derived from the case that she can see me, as a single Mum, just trying to make things work... - **Libby N**

On the other hand, participants such as Ana Q described how the heavily procedure-oriented approach from the DWP often leads to people feeling their individual circumstances are being overlooked and work coaches are unsympathetic.

So far from my previous experience I understand that work coaches don't understand individual's circumstances but go by the procedures. People come to Jobcentre Plus when they are jobless and on benefit means they are in stress and facing difficulty to run their family. Work coaches should show their sympathy to them and allow more time to look for the job or train them in such a way that they do not feel too stressed which may affect them adversely at the end of the day. - **Ana Q**

The experience of Ana is reflected in research highlighting that work coaches having [heavy caseloads](#) and brief [appointment slots](#) restrict opportunities for personalised support within the existing system.

A number of different factors combine to undermine trust and understanding in the current functioning of employment support. These include conditionality and the work-first emphasis of employment support (discussed below), but also simply that there is often little consistency in who claimants see at the Jobcentre. As Sal E explained:

Every email I sent to dwp was answered by a different dwp employee - no continuity to the tone of the emails - one dwp employee contradicts another - hence the circle. - **Sal E**

Dotty G elaborates how the current policy design makes it very difficult to develop strong relationships between work coach and claimant:

I don't believe that Work Coaches understand our individual circumstances, because it seems as if I see a different Work Coach whenever I have an appointment. Because they change them all the time, and it's very difficult to build up a relationship with one, and because of this, they'll never get to understand your individual circumstances because you're constantly having to explain them to a new and different Work Coach over and over again. - **Dotty G**

A significant number of disabled and/or sick people encountered challenges in adequately demonstrating their limitations, resulting in assessments that inaccurately assess them as fully capable of work. Dotty G is a lone parent with a disability who underwent multiple reassessments before it was recognised that she had limited work capacity. Dotty, and other disabled claimants, still experience some conditionality and can be sanctioned. It appears there is a prevailing misconception that disabled people can easily find work, which is then often used to justify the application of sanctions/conditionality. However, in reality, there are numerous individuals who desire employment but face substantial barriers that prevent them from doing so.

1.3 “I would love to be a wage earner again:” barriers to work

Participants described a lack of understanding from the DWP about the kinds of barriers to work some people face, and that motivation is not a barrier to work. There are many reasons some people cannot enter full-time employment or employment altogether, for example health needs or caring responsibilities. Lili K, a parent who receives PIP, Tax Credits, Carer’s Allowance, and Child Benefit, told us:

I wish I was able to get and keep paid employment. I would love to be a wage earner again and be able to provide a better standard of living for myself and my family. Unfortunately having BiPolar made that impossible for me when I took a pharmacological cocktail of mood stabilizers, anti psychotics, antidepressants, sedatives and sleeping tablets. Now I am not taking any medication, I experience mood swings much faster, more frequently, more intensely and painfully than ever before and this is also not conducive to turning up for work every day. – Lili K

Moreover, secure employment opportunities are limited, and fluctuating hours and moving in and out of work can increase financial insecurity. There is routinely a motivation to enter paid work but trepidation about job quality, income, and losing benefits as Benny V told us:

Just got a new job so feeling hopeful, but worried that all my money is going to be cut e.g Universal Credit and going to be worse off. At my current job, I'm scared to even take a day off I'll too look after my child as I don't get paid, and my universal credit don't go up and work is not understanding. – **Benny V**

The DWP contends that UC [should increase](#) if the number of hours worked goes down. However, as demonstrated in Benny V's extract, this policy can cause concern and uncertainty.

1.4 “I don't believe that Work Coaches understand our individual circumstances”: the inflexibility of ‘work-first’

There is consistent feedback from participants that the DWP emphasise that any job is better than no job and there is pressure to enter any kind of employment as quickly as possible. The current approach from the DWP/Jobcentre Plus is one which disregards individual qualifications and circumstances, prioritising any job without considering suitability or personal aspirations. As Precious D told us:

I did not receive any help (employment support) but only put pressure to go and look for any jobs available - without the benefit authority's agents taking into account my personal circumstances. – **Precious D**

The pressure to apply for and accept any available job was experienced widely by Changing Realities participants. For instance, Mollie U explicitly expresses feelings of anxiety toward the social security system because she feels her personal circumstances and barriers to full-time employment will be overlooked:

I was working for a small charity previously, but they wanted me to work too many hours which would have significantly impacted the carers allowance I receive. I had to stop working as the workload became too heavy to juggle the children and a job which demanded late

nights and a non-stop workload. I now feel anxious about returning to work as I feel I will be forced to take “any job” as opposed to one which will actually suit my family dynamic. – **Mollie U**

The experiences of participants in Changing Realities suggest that the DWP should seek to accommodate personal circumstances within employment support and take into account the needs of individuals and families. This would make it more likely that those who receive support will enter the workplace and stay there for longer in the future. The current ‘work-first’ approach fails to provide adequate support for professionals transitioning into new fields, resulting in pressures to apply for low-quality employment, with the persistent threat of sanctions. Mollie U illustrates the damaging impact of this approach on relationships and the breakdown in trust between Jobcentre staff and claimants when the Jobcentre Plus dismisses individual circumstances:

It almost felt like I was in a “job machine” where they would just churn out jobs they thought I could apply for even though I have an area of expertise which they disregarded. It’s very hard to maintain a level of respect for the job centre when from the get-go you are made to feel inadequate. – **Mollie U**

1.5 “How is this Social Security?”: intensified conditionality

When Changing Realities participants discuss their experiences of the social security system, conditionality is often central to the narrative. This holds true, even for people who are not obligated to seek employment, as highlighted in a recent [blog post by a Changing Realities participant](#). There is a substantial body of [evidence](#) showing that benefit sanctions instil fear and anger amongst recipients, rather than enhanced motivation to look for work or employment outcomes. The threat of sanctions can be as damaging as the application of a sanction itself, in terms of a recipient’s security and well-being. The enforced insecurity it generates reduces individuals’ ability to look for work and the opportunity for a collaborative relationship with the state, as Aurora T, a lone parent who receives UC and Child Benefit, told us:

"I live in perpetual fear of sanctioning and my work place have given me fewer hours next month. I work in care, and have a zero hours contract. As I am subject to conditionality, fewer hours will mean I will be visiting the job centre and searching for more work."

- Aurora T

Benefit sanctions are often understood as arbitrary punishment, and recipients feel they are under attack. Benefit sanctions are not perceived or experienced as a fitting punishment for non-compliance. There is a shared perception within the Changing Realities cohort that benefit sanctions being fundamental to the policy design helps to foster intimidation and creates an unassailable barrier to collaborative relationships between work coach and beneficiary. Even the fear of sanctions can leave recipients feeling disdain towards the whole system and cause lasting emotional damage, as Joe, a parent who receives UC and PIP, told us:

Conditionality is a damaging thing as I didn't report something a while ago for a few days and was told I had breached Universal Credit rules and was explained they could even punish me by charging me £50 for breaching the rules. How is this social security? This is more of a dictator regime, and if you do something wrong we will punish you. **- Joe**

Our co-produced evidence aligns with a large and growing body of [literature](#) demonstrating that the fear and the application of benefit sanctions can harm recipients' wellbeing and employment outcomes. Victoria S is a lone parent who experiences mental ill-health and receives UC and Personal Independence Payment. Her diary entry gives insight into the possible restorative impacts a reduction in conditionality and the removal of the fear of sanctions can have, in terms of individual well-being and getting closer to entering employment:

Just before last Christmas I was awarded LCWRA which sees a pause in my looking for work and an income boost to my Universal Credit enabling me to focus on getting my mental health better and focus on my therapeutic

needs. The freedom from the fear of sanctions is powerfully helpful [...] I've since been awarded PIP as well which will largely be used for bus travel to appointments and support groups, and affording said support groups (nothing's free anymore, not even Minds services, before PIP I simply couldn't afford such services). - **Victoria S**

1.6 “I am in paid work but I am no better off than I am if I didn't work”: support out of touch with the contemporary labour market

Our evidence suggests DWP policy seems to be based on the false premise that good quality employment is available for all those who seek it and there is no acknowledgement from Jobcentre staff that in reality this is not the case. Employers are not required to make sure their jobs are good jobs and the conditions experienced within the jobs available are often substandard. Aurora T told us:

I am in paid employment. I work part time in the social care sector. I am on a zero hours contract, which means my hours and pay fluctuate from month to month. I try to work around school hours, but this can also be difficult. Annual leave is not calculated in the same way and my entitlement is very different from those with a permanent contract. - **Aurora T**

Low pay often leads to people having to work multiple jobs to get by. For instance, Ettie who lives in a couple household with four children told us:

I'm working 3 jobs because it's a means to an end. If I didn't have 3 jobs, I would be struggling even more. I'm incredibly busy but manage my work hours well. I enjoy my work because I support other people less fortunate than myself both directly and indirectly. - **Ettie**

This often leaves people exhausted and financially worse off than if they

worked one secure job. Changing Realities participants argue that the current system is out of touch with the contemporary labour market. In this, they are in agreement with employers, as reported by the [‘Universal Credit and Employers’](#) study, which argues that more needs to be done to shape the demand side of the labour market. Herbie, a lone parent who receives UC and Child Benefit, and who has no requirement to look for work at the moment, argues that the current system is completely out of step with the policy aim of getting more people into employment:

“The idea that UC gets you into work or off benefits into better employed work, is nonsense. Its system of commitments and sanctions simply puts people under pressure to do more, low paid, poorly supported work, so they are financed less by the government.” – **Herbie**

Towards employment support that works: Our co-produced recommendations for change

The evidence shared above forms a compelling and persuasive argument for the need to implement change. When designed and conceptualised appropriately, social security and employment support have the potential to be a positive force, addressing inequalities, offering skill-building opportunities and employment prospects for those seeking them, while also serving as a safety net during challenging times. Sadly, at present, a combination of the inadequacy of benefit levels and a punitive conditionality regime, greatly reduce the effectiveness of this arm of our welfare state, with stark negative outcomes.

Our co-produced recommendations for change have been developed in partnership between parents and carers living on a low-income, members of the Changing Realities research team, and our briefing partner: the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR). Together we propose six recommendations, aimed at enhancing employment support and fostering better relations with the DWP/DfC. These recommendations have the potential to bring about significant improvements and positively impact the lives of those in need.

1

Improve adequacy of the social security system

There is an immediate and compelling case to improve the adequacy of social security payments, recognising the additional financial pressures [created for families](#) by sharply rising prices and the legacy of chronic underfunding of our social security system. Our evidence shows people are facing significant challenges in meeting their basic needs which undoubtedly impacts on their ability to look for work as well as potentially harming their relationship with their work coach, and the DWP/DfC more widely. To address the inadequacy of the social security system we strongly recommend:

- increasing all benefits, including Universal Credit and, until managed migration is complete, legacy benefits
- reintroducing the additional element for people deemed to have Limited Capability for Work to provide a more adequate safety net for people whose health means they face [barriers to securing employment](#)
- removing the initial five week wait for Universal Credit so that people can access UC when their claim is accepted households experiencing financial hardship do not fall into debt through advance payments. The Government should.
- the government should restore the link between need and entitlement for families by abolishing the [two-child limit and the benefit cap](#), as recommended in our [previous briefing](#).
- The government should also target more support for families with children by increasing child benefit, which has fallen drastically in real terms, and is less more today than it was 20 years ago

2

Transform Universal Credit to make it fit for purpose

Reforming the adequacy of social security is essential, but it's not sufficient. Structural and design changes to UC are also imperative if it is to become fit for purpose. The fluctuation of UC payments, based on previous earnings, creates income instability, while housing payments

being misaligned with payment deadlines further exacerbate problems. The DWP should explore [flexible assessment periods](#), allowing individuals to adjust timings for more stable income and easier budgeting, especially for those in insecure work or irregular wage patterns. Furthermore, to mitigate the income [instability and unpredictability in UC](#), the DWP should consider transferring childcare cost support from UC. Ideally, this transition would involve adopting longer fixed awards for childcare costs that allow financial assistance to increase but not decrease.

To contribute to a more supportive social security system, we recommend providing more meaningful incentives for people to return to work by increasing benefit rates, introducing work allowances in more circumstances and further reducing the taper rate at which UC is reduced with earnings. Ensuring accessibility and financial well-being for UC claimants is essential, including covering expenses for internet access and job-related equipment. The DWP should allocate [specific financial aid to the flexible support fund](#), making the recent free broadband offer accessible to all jobseekers. Additionally, providing affordable assistance for low-cost netbooks and tablets is crucial for claimants without access to such devices.

3

Remove the threat of sanctions

It is time for punitive and ineffective forms of behavioural conditionality to go, something which is supported by a wide and consistent [evidence base](#). Research, some of which has come from the [DWP](#), has found sanctions to be ineffective, which instead tend to [inflict further harm](#) on those already facing hardship and financial insecurity. We call for Jobcentres to refocus on offering substantial support and mentorship, instead of exerting pressure, where people feel assigned to any available job without due consideration. Conditionality is based on the [logic](#) that unemployed individuals lack motivation for jobs and need coercion/encouragement. However, this briefing highlights the real issue is structural barriers, not lack of motivation. Shifting away from harsh conditionality and sanctions, greater attention should be given to supporting those with additional barriers such as childcare issues or the need for reasonable adjustments in work. The DWP should play a more proactive role in supporting individuals navigating the early stages of a new role, and in signposting to wellbeing or mental health support available locally, while also considering the impact of transitions in and out of work on individuals' mental health.

4

A consistent work coach

Establishing relationships built on mutual understanding between claimants and work coaches is of utmost importance to claimant's mental health and wider employment outcomes. To promote this, it is essential to grant claimants the right to a consistent case worker or a dedicated point of contact at the Jobcentre. We found Changing Realities participants felt their treatment within the benefits system is often degrading and fails to acknowledge and respond to the realities of family life. Establishing a regular, reliable point of contact and providing personalised support can be immensely valuable in recognising people's circumstances and [providing appropriate guidance and mentorship](#). The current lack of flexibility, variability in work coach support, and reliance on [automated systems](#), described in this briefing, can leave claimants without adequate support. Having a consistent point of contact with an individual whose training has an alternative focus than 'work first' would help build positive relationships and subsequently increase trust in the DWP's assessments and return-to-work guidance. Based on participant experiences, it is evident that work coaches' empathy and training levels vary considerably. This underscores the necessity for improved frontline training to better grasp the unique barriers to work that certain individuals encounter. Additionally, such training can enhance awareness of available services and local community resources, including specific programs like [Access to Work](#).

5

Statement of claimant rights

The current social security system is burdened with [complex procedures for monitoring](#) claimants' fulfilment of conditions, overshadowing their entitlement to social security as a basic right. To rebalance the relationship between rights and responsibilities, transparent mechanisms are needed to hold the DWP and Jobcentre accountable. We recommend implementing a statement of rights for claimants, similar to the existing '[Claimant Commitment](#)', to strengthen accountability and improve the claimant-work coach relationship. This statement could be a very clear articulation of the rights which claimants can expect to see upheld during their encounters with the DWP and Job Centre Plus, including for example,

maximum length of time they can expect to wait before a response to a query, and a right to be treated with dignity, compassion and respect. Additionally, an external accountability mechanism would help to address some power imbalances between claimant and work coach; this is particularly important when considering changes to assessing Limited Capability for Work by giving work coaches greater discretionary decision making.

As part of setting out a statement of claimant rights, the DWP should have an explicit duty to maximise income and promote financial wellbeing for social security claimants. Financial wellbeing is a [crucial aspect of overall wellbeing](#) and by prioritising the promotion of financial wellbeing for claimants, the DWP can contribute to a more inclusive, equitable, and socially responsible social security system. The system itself is sometimes prone to errors, and the lack of [recognition of personal circumstances, coupled with inflexibility](#), has negative impacts on the physical and mental [health of claimants](#). A duty to promote financial wellbeing would provide the institutional framework to address these issues and better support claimants.

6

Improved access to skills/training through JCP

Due to the concerns raised throughout our briefing regarding training and support offered by the DWP, we urge for greater support in exploring work avenues aligned with more holistic approaches at the JCP. This involves taking individual skills and career goals into consideration rather than approaching claimants with suspicion and enforcing a ‘work-first’ approach. Moreover, the focus on paid work leads to the valuable contributions of volunteer work often going unrecognised, despite the critical role volunteering can play on a personal level, social level, and in helping people secure employment. Key policy recommendations that flow from improved access to skills/training include the provision of job-relevant training that improves employability in sectors beyond the traditional ones, as well as person centred courses focusing on self-confidence, mental health awareness, and advocacy. Flexibility, accessibility for remote areas, job training with guaranteed employment, and enhanced job incentives, are also necessary improvements to the system.

Conclusion

Parents and carers living on a low-income from across the UK have come together to push for change, collaborating on Changing Realities in the hope that tomorrow can be better than today. In order to enhance the effectiveness of support programs provided by the DWP, DFC and JCP, there is a growing recognition of the importance of longer-term outcomes. It is essential to provide clearer communication regarding expectations and available support, ensuring that the system is enabling and encouraging rather than punitive or punishing. Tailoring support to address the underlying barriers to work is crucial to tackling the root causes of unemployment. Moreover, building trust in work coach-claimant relationships is vital to improve outcomes by emphasising continuity of support, developing a stronger understanding of the wider context, and fostering reciprocity between claimants and the DWP. By implementing our recommendations, the aim to create a more inclusive and successful support system for people seeking employment can be realised.

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