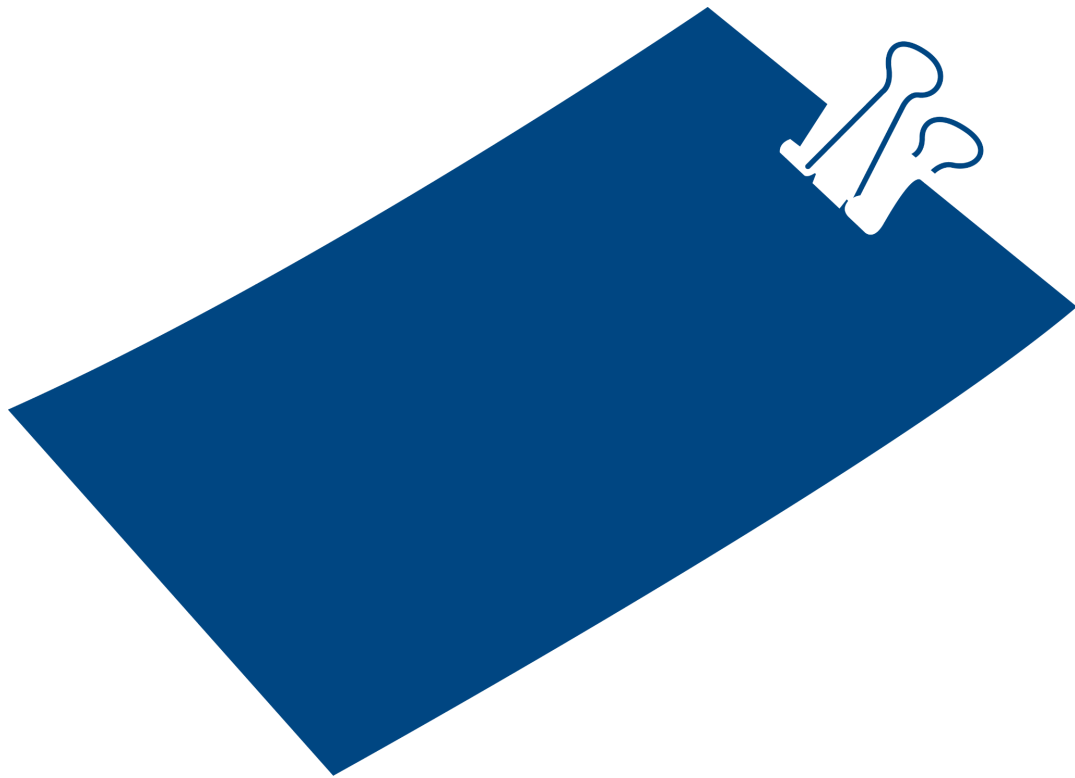


Found anything yet?

Exploring the relationship
between Universal Credit
claimants and their work
coaches



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January 2025

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Executive Summary

This report examines the relationships between Universal Credit (UC) claimants and their work coaches. It shows that, while many work coaches seek to provide meaningful support to claimants, they face multiple challenges in achieving this. This research complements and builds on many of the proposals in the government's 'Get Britain Working' white paper.

We recorded a wide spectrum of claimant experiences: ranging from empathetic and constructive support, through bureaucracy and indifference, to actively hostile and unproductive interactions. Work coaches work in a system that prioritises the application of a harsh conditionality regime to achieve short-term outcomes, but offers limited capacity to deliver high-quality employment service and accommodate personal needs. Too often this leaves claimants feeling unsupported and disempowered.

Key barriers to positive relationships

We found that work coaches are managing high workloads and afforded little time to support claimants. While the majority are passionate about helping people, they lack time and training to provide meaningful support. Their focus is primarily on monitoring claimants' compliance with their commitments, so many claimants feel their meetings were simply a 'tick box' exercise.

There is a strong desire from both claimants and work coaches to be able to build collaborative relationships. Currently though, meetings feel rushed, impersonal and inconsistent. For claimants, key barriers to strong relationships include not seeing the same work coach each time, and a sense that expectations and commitments are one-sided.

We heard that communication issues can be a barrier for some claimants. Some face practical and technical issues with the journal, such as not getting notifications. Others told us that their work coaches were not responsive to messages or changed appointments with little notice. Digital exclusion is a significant and persistent issue for some claimants, as are language barriers and a lack of timely access to translation services.

The threat of sanctions can also be a significant barrier. The heavy dependence on work coaches and their role in the application of sanctions can result in an

unequal power dynamic between them and UC claimants. A number of claimants told us that they felt the risk of being sanctioned undermined trust in their relationships with their work coaches. As part of the shift away from the focus on compliance, sanctions should be explicitly treated as a last resort and de-emphasised by work coaches.

Work coach discretion

Our research shows that work coach discretion is fundamental to providing truly tailored and effective employment support. For discretion to be used effectively, work coaches need to be given meaningful flexibility in how they support claimants.

However, we do hear from some claimants whose needs are not adequately taken into account by work coaches. Too often, our advisers help people who have been asked to meet inappropriate conditions, such as being asked to look for work when they aren't well enough. Increased discretion should therefore go hand in hand with greater safeguarding and oversight, to ensure that work coach discretion is always applied appropriately.

Training needs

We welcome the government's plans to launch a new coaching academy, focused on goal setting and action planning. It is vital that this training includes communication skills such as active listening. A focus on actively building positive working relationships would upskill work coaches and foster an improved working culture.

Claimants told us they hugely valued the Flexible Support Fund (FSF), but we heard that there is currently no formal training on how the FSF can be applied. Work coaches' knowledge of the fund is instead dependent on informal training provided within Jobcentres. Formal training should be provided as standard to all work coaches on the use and application of the FSF.

Glossary

Terms used throughout this report include:

Administrative Earning Threshold (AET) - level of monthly income above which UC claimants don't need to regularly meet with a work coach. Currently, rates are £892 per month for single claimants and £1437 for couples.

Claimant commitment - document setting out the work-related requirements that claimants agree to in order to receive UC payments. According to UC guidance, these requirements should be tailored and reflect individual circumstances.

Conditionality Earnings Threshold (CET) - the level of earnings at which claimants don't need to carry out any work-related activity. The CET is usually equivalent to working 35 hours at the National Living Wage, but is flexible depending on people's circumstances.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) - government department responsible for the administration of social security, including Universal Credit.

Flexible Support Fund - fund that can be used at the discretion of work coaches to cover additional costs of finding employment, for example travel and clothing costs.

Get Britain Working white paper - policy document published by the government in November 2024 setting out plans for employment reforms.

Limited Capability for Work and Work-Related Activity (LCWRA) and **Limited Capability for Work (LCW)** - conditionality groups that can be assigned after the health assessment, which respectively remove or limit work-search requirements.

Universal Credit (UC) - means-tested benefit for working-age households. It was rolled out from 2013 and is gradually replacing a group of 6 'legacy benefits' (Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), and income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)).

Universal Credit journal - online platform used by DWP to communicate with claimants and inform them about the details of their claim. Claimants can use it to send messages to their work coaches and report changes in circumstances.

UC standard allowance - basic UC rate, awarded to each claimant irrespective of their circumstances. On top of the standard allowance, some people receive child element, housing element and additional disability-related payments as a part of their UC claim. UC awards for people in work are reduced above a certain earnings threshold by 55p for each £1 earned.

Work Capability Assessment (WCA) - a health assessment designed to determine UC claimants' ability to work and undertake work search. Its outcome determines the 'conditionality group', i.e., the relevant category of work search requirements.

Work coaches - civil servants based in Jobcentres responsible for supporting UC claimants with transition into work, and monitoring compliance with work-related requirements.

Work-focused interview - Jobcentre appointment with a work coach (usually fortnightly).

Introduction

Background

The role of work coaches

Work coaches bear a wide range of responsibilities, from supporting people into employment and offering advice, to monitoring their engagement through possible sanctions referrals. Importantly, they tend to be the only ‘real people’ representing the system that claimants encounter in their experience of claiming benefits. This means that on top of their regular duties, work coaches are expected to signpost other services and explain the complex rules of benefit administration. Work coaches are also expected to “build positive relationships with customers that encourage, motivate, and build trust” and “supporting customers to [...] obtain additional support and advice to access our services”¹.

This spectrum of responsibilities is not mirrored by the resources available to Jobcentres. The ratio of work coaches to UC Claimants (in conditionality regimes requiring Jobcentres visits) in March 2024 was 1 to 177². Our research suggests that such high workloads hinder the ability to offer tailored, individual support for claimants.

Conditionality and sanctions

Universal Credit (UC) claimants who are deemed fit for work³ are subject to welfare conditionality. This means that benefits payments are dependent on fulfilling a set of work search related requirements. Currently, just over 30% of all people claiming UC are subject to conditionality⁴. For most claimants, this centres around attending fortnightly work coach appointments, looking for work and increasing their earnings if they’re already in employment.

¹ Work coach job overview available at: <https://www.dwpjobs-eorecruitment-microsite.co.uk/role>.

² To calculate this ratio we divided the number of people in conditionality groups who met with work coaches (searching for work, planning for work, preparing for work, working with requirements and unknown) in March 2024 (based on StatXplore data) by the number of work coaches employed at that time (published in a FOIA request made on 01 May 2024 by Andy Paddington, available [here](#)).

³ And those deemed capable of work at some time in the future (ie the LCW group).

⁴ Benefit sanctions statistics to August 2024, available [here](#).

All these requirements are set out in a document called a claimant commitment, signed at the beginning of each UC claim, and monitored by work coaches. The standard requirement is for claimants to spend 35 hours per week looking for work, which has been criticised as harmful and unrealistic⁵. Working UC claimants earning less than the Administrative Earning Threshold (AET) are also expected to meet with a work coach and look to increase their hours. The AET is currently £892 for a single claimant (as of May 2024)⁶.

If claimants fail to comply with these requirements without good reason, they might face a sanction. This normally means cutting 100% of their UC standard allowance⁷, which for some could mean their whole income. This can last for a specified period of time (increasing for subsequent sanctions) or until they meet their requirements. In August 2024, almost half of sanctions were applied for 5 to 13 weeks. Slightly over 10% of sanctions claimants had their benefit removed for over 27 weeks⁸.

Most sanctions are applied for minor failings: from May 2023 to April 2024, 93.7% of sanctions were applied for missing a work coach meeting. In August 2024, 5.61% of claimants in conditionality regimes where sanction can be applied were subject to a sanction⁹.

Methodology

Findings in this report are based on 25 qualitative interviews with UC claimants (15) and Citizens Advice advisers (10). We recruited claimants through fliers and posters distributed at our local Citizens Advice offices.

In addition to the interviews, we also reviewed over 700 relevant evidence notes produced by our local advisers between 1st January 2023 and 30th September 2024.

⁵ For example, in “Working for the Future: Launch report for the Commission on the Future of Employment Support”, Institute for Employment Studies, Nov 2022, available [here](#)

⁶ Universal Credit and earnings government information available [here](#).

⁷ Sanction rates are lower (40%) for some people with caring responsibilities and for people aged under 18.

⁸ Benefit sanctions statistics to August 2024, available [here](#).

⁹ Ibid.

We surveyed our advisers through our network panel survey (NPS) in October and November 2024. The NPS is a monthly questionnaire disseminated to staff in our local offices across England and Wales.

We also visited 2 Jobcentres in different parts of England. During these visits, we were able to observe first identification appointments, claimant commitment appointments, and work-focused interviews. We also spoke informally with work coaches, team leaders and senior staff.

We haven't specified the locations of any of the people we spoke to as part of this project, in order to protect their anonymity.

Limitations

Recruitment through Citizens Advice offices might have resulted in overrepresentation of people with negative experiences. This is for 2 reasons:

- People attending our offices are typically seeking help with a problem, so there is a higher chance they have encountered an issue with their UC claim
- People tend to be more keen to be interviewed if they have had a negative experience and want to talk about it.

That means that situations where the support from Jobcentres was effective might be under-recorded by this research. We spoke to work coaches and other Jobcentre staff to help provide a balance of perspectives, but acknowledge that this does not fully resolve this limitation in our data.

However, there is also a possibility that this research may not fully record experiences of the most vulnerable groups, for example people facing homelessness and/or with serious health conditions. This is because participation required proactively signing up and having a conversation with a stranger, which some people would find overwhelming. Additionally, our recruitment was limited to people who can and do access Citizens Advice support.

Content overview

Given the significance of work coaches' in claimants' UC journey, this research examines the relationships between work coaches and UC claimants and

identifies policy recommendations to improve access to personalised support. In particular, we explore:

- what the interactions between claimants and work coaches look like
- how work coach discretion is exercised in practice and how their approaches differ depending on claimants' individual circumstances
- what support is available to work coaches and what support they need to better help UC claimants
- best practices that should be applied more widely

Our research and recommendations broadly align with the strategy set out in the Get Britain Working white paper. We welcome the more holistic and compassionate approach indicated by the government, such as shifting the focus from monitoring compliance, improving engagement with the system, and creating a more inclusive and fit-for-purpose employment support system. This report helps to identify specific problems within the current, flawed approach in order to inform the focus of the reform agenda.

The remainder of this report is divided into 5 main sections: relationships between claimants and work coaches, accommodating individual circumstances, Jobcentres' service design, employment support and the impact of sanctions. The recommendations are highlighted throughout the report, but a list can be also found at the end, before the conclusion.

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Work coach and claimant relationships

UC claimants we interviewed had a very wide range of experiences with their work coaches. Despite many positive examples we came across during interviews, it is clear that consistent, negative attitudes are still present among some work coaches. This chapter captures the positive attitudes we found, such as flexibility and empathy, as well as the more concerning qualities such as poor manners and even hostility. We highlight the value of claimants seeing the same work coach over time and the challenges of the systemic focus on claimant compliance.

The value of flexibility and empathy

Some of the claimants we spoke to developed very good relationships with their work coaches. They especially valued work coaches showing empathy about their personal circumstances, belief in their abilities, and friendly encouragement, whilst acknowledging barriers to work. Positive comments were made by our interviewees about humour and small talk, which generally made conversations more personal. People recalled with fondness things like smiling, or asking about their children or health. One of the interviewees recalled an atmosphere of mutual respect and politeness between them and their work coach.

Another person we spoke to said her first work coach did everything they could to help them, including providing emotional support. People also appreciated more tangible gestures. For example, offering Flexible Support Fund (FSF) grants (explored in more detail below) and being flexible around appointment times.

"I do feel that [...] [work coaches] seem to have the attitude that you treat people maybe a bit more like they're human beings, maybe there's a better work relationship there" - UC Claimant

Importantly, some interviewees have had significantly different experiences with different work coaches, often within the same Jobcentre. Such variation within one workplace suggests that if negative behaviours do occur, there might not be enough supervision or the correct incentives to identify and eliminate them.

"So I think [my] work coach was very helpful because he would just take my personal circumstances into consideration, he would work with me, [...] not by the general guidance. [...] he was more personal." - UC Claimant

Problematic work coach attitudes

Jobcentre experience is highly dependent on the way claimants are treated. Whilst some work coaches go 'above and beyond' to support claimants into work, this research showed some concerning attitudes and behaviours.

Some interviewees reported hostility towards claimants, amplified by the perceived lack of trust and impatience. A common sentiment was that work coaches wanted to catch people out and waited for them to make a mistake. Work coaches' tone was sometimes described as condescending and belittling. One claimant told us that, while they know they are entitled to claim UC, they feel staff "hate you for actually claiming it."

"I felt I was being punished for being unemployed, I was being humiliated because my social status is low about being unemployed. [...] And every time I had to go and see her, I was shaking before the appointment, because I knew it was just total hostility, you know, it's just really, really difficult." - UC Claimant

Claimants felt like some work coaches wanted to punish them, for example by referring them for sanctions without a fair reason. Even when the relationship was mutually respectful, claimants often pointed to an unhealthy power dynamic. They feared questioning their work coaches' suggestions in case they would be put down as difficult or work-shy. This dynamic prevents claimants and work coaches from developing a candid, positive and constructive relationship.

One claimant told us about a particularly difficult relationship where they felt they would be in trouble no matter what they did. They told us, "I said you [the work coach] really don't seem to be on my side at all. And she said, 'Well, at the Jobcentre we're not on your side.'" Their work coach also criticised their English language skills, despite being a native speaker, and refused to put them forward for roles involving a lot of speaking.

Poor relationships also negatively affect work coaches. We spoke to a work coach who travelled for over 2 hours every day to get to work to avoid working at their local Jobcentre, out of fear of being recognised on the streets. From our

conversations, work coaches avoiding working locally seems to be a common phenomenon. The Citizens Advice adviser we spoke to who used to be a work coach said they resigned shortly after completing the training because of the fear of abuse and unpleasant comments made about them. Improving conditions and attitudes at Jobcentres is crucial not only for the sake of UC claimants, but also for work coaches.

"It wouldn't surprise me if the staff at the Jobcentre have to work at a Jobcentre that's not anywhere near where they live. Maybe they have to travel a long distance for their own personal safety." - UC Claimant

Recommendations:

- Jobcentres should improve safeguarding, including through greater managerial oversight of work coaches' interactions with claimants.
- DWP should improve training for work coaches on communication skills, including active listening and relationship building.

Systemic weaknesses

It is worth noting that most claimants we spoke to empathised with their work coaches, rather than blaming them for the negative aspects of their Jobcentre experience. The lack of individual support was mainly ascribed to the system overall, as opposed to individual hostility or incompetence. Claimants also understood the stress work coaches are under and often identified it as a root cause of unpleasant exchanges.

"Over the years, of all the benefits that I've ever claimed, I feel like Universal Credit is the worst. I really feel like they just kind of dehumanise you. I don't mean it's intentional by them because they've obviously got a job to do." - UC Claimant

During our Jobcentres visits, we met committed and empathetic staff who were determined to help their clients. However, it is also clear that some claimants have more negative experiences. In such situations, claimants often found it difficult to change their work coach, or were too afraid to ask. One of the claimants we talked to reported raising a complaint against their work coach. As a result, they reported being threatened with sanctions by the Jobcentre's manager and saw no changes in their treatment.

Recommendation: Jobcentres should apply a uniform, reliable and discreet complaints process. The complaints process should be made clearly available to all claimants, including the option to escalate complaints to someone impartial outside of the Jobcentre.

Multiple work coaches

People coming to Jobcentres often have complex needs and experiences. This means that establishing a relationship of trust, especially against the backdrop of conditionality, might take some time. It is often the case that work coaches change throughout the claim. This means that claimants are required to repeat their personal stories multiple times, including details that are confidential and even traumatic. One of the claimants we interviewed had 6 work coaches in less than a year.

“Since the end of COVID, it's just been a revolving door of different people, different names appear on emails, if they appear at all. I speak to a different person every time and I have to start from scratch. If they're interested at all.” - UC Claimant

The claimants we spoke to viewed the lack of continuity as a barrier to establishing a relationship of trust. Our informal conversations with work coaches indicated that they also find constant changes frustrating. Time for reading the casefile is not factored into their schedule, so they often rush through it and confirm basic information with the client during the appointment. This wastes time and makes the relationship less personal.

One work coach we spoke to told us that when they make appointments, they make the effort to ensure claimants see the same person¹⁰. They emphasised the importance of this consistency, telling us that it was particularly important to avoid claimants having to repeat conversations if they disclosed complex, personal circumstances. However, they acknowledged that some of their colleagues didn't prioritise this consistency in the same way.

The same work coach also told us that they arrive early to work, to allow time to read through case files before their appointments. They take the time to look at claimants' needs and circumstances, as well as to review their claimant

¹⁰ Work coaches can schedule appointments for claimants with other work coaches.

commitments. This should be a formalised part of the work coaches' schedule; often, they do it outside of working hours, without extra pay.

Different work coaches also tend to employ different approaches to the support they provide, which can be confusing. Claimants reported receiving inconsistent information as to what was required of them. For example, one of the interviewees reported conflicting guidance on whether evening courses constituted a part of the 35 hour work-search requirement.

"Work coaches change all the time. [...] Before when I was applying, somehow I found that the job website was connected to my Universal Credit account [UC journal]. I didn't know how it was working but my previous coach set it up for me so I asked this one [to do the same]. [...] He said 'oh I don't think it's possible' - that's it, he didn't even look into it." - UC Claimant

An unbalanced relationship

Interviewees frequently mentioned a perceived asymmetry of expectations in Jobcentres' practices. There would often be long waits and appointments scheduled with little notice, but honest mistakes by claimants (such as not picking up the phone straight away) tend to be treated harshly. Similar patterns applied to the quality of service received: claimants were subject to heightened scrutiny of their work search obligations, yet the support received was often perceived as superficial.

"The funny thing is though is that it's okay for them to keep you ten, fifteen, twenty minutes waiting after your appointment time, but if you get there a minute late and they're waiting, they'll ask you why you were a minute late, you know. And you've just got to bite your tongue." - UC Claimant

Work coach appointments are scheduled back to back, with no break between them. This is partly the result of work coach caseloads being too high, which undermines their own working conditions as well as support for claimants. One of the work coaches we talked to said that it is even difficult for them to use the bathroom because of the tight schedule. Work coaches are frequently late to meetings, mostly through no fault of their own. Although this does not stem from disrespect or indifference, it might be perceived as such - especially in light of the significant emphasis on punctuality expected from claimants. Claimants

we spoke to viewed this as an imbalance in the standards expected from each side.

Recommendation: Work coaches' caseloads should be reduced to allow for greater flexibility in their schedules, such as more breaks and preparation time.

One of our interviewees gave an example of a poster requesting polite and respectful behaviour, at the risk of sanctions. They felt that the way the work coach addressed them could not be described as such. People reported that some work coaches do not admit to and apologise for mistakes they make, but they expect clients to comply with their commitments.

A way to mitigate this sentiment could be through the introduction of a 'support plan', in which work coaches would outline what they can offer in what timelines. This would balance out the claimant commitment, making the relationship more two-sided and increasing accountability.

Recommendation: A 'support plan' complementing claimant commitments should be introduced to formally identify the support that claimants can expect to receive from the Jobcentre.

Tick-box exercise

Interviewees often reported a lack of a personal approach in Jobcentre support. Meetings were widely perceived as administrative in nature, sometimes centred around forwarding job advertisements. Many claimants told us that they were not offered personalised job coaching, including little discussion of their goals or preferences. Work coaches typically didn't provide guidance on what jobs might suit them or how to apply for them. We frequently heard that it felt like work coaches were reading from a script.

"Why do we actually need to go to the Jobcentre? [...] Honestly, when I go, they just ask me: 'What are you doing to find work?' They're not giving me any information about jobs out there that I could apply to. They're not giving me any advice about how I can improve my situation." - UC Claimant

Our advisers have also expressed concern about the quality of employment support provided by work coaches. In a survey of staff from local Citizens Advice offices, about half (48%) said that work coaches were generally not helpful¹¹.

Claimants often felt that these problems came from the system as a whole, such as issues with bureaucracy and capacity, rather than individual staff members. However, some people perceived the work coaches themselves to be indifferent, or even lacking care about claimants' wellbeing and circumstances.

"I don't know if there literally is a script, but I feel like it's like a computer game where, if I can create the right data points from the input, then it will trigger some other junction on the flowchart and then maybe circumstances would change. If I don't come up with the correct prompts, nothing will change, right? So, there's no human negotiation [...] at all, it's just this robotic kind of thing." - UC Claimant

One interviewee felt the sole goal of the Jobcentre visits was to schedule another appointment. Similarly, one of our advisers felt that the goal of work coach appointments is to have seen people, rather than to help them. Meetings were described as meaningless and a waste of time, with the same questions being asked repeatedly. One person we helped told us they travelled an hour each way to the Jobcentre, but at the appointment they "did not go through anything". Both claimants and advisers highlighted that even well-intentioned work coaches often fail to offer more than a fortnightly compliance check.

"You come in, you might be in for less than 10 minutes. How productive can you be in 10 minutes?" - UC Claimant

Some interviewees doubted whether longer appointments would make a difference, as they identified the underlying focus on monitoring compliance as a primary problem. However, the majority thought more time could render appointments more constructive and less rushed. A possible option would be to offer longer, in-depth appointments less frequently (for example, every 1-2 months). These would be either in-person or via video, with shorter telephone appointments arranged in-between.

¹¹ 105 advisers (41%) reported that clients find work coach support "not very helpful" in securing employment and 17 (7%) said they were "not helpful at all".

Recommendation: DWP should review appointment durations and implement a more flexible system allowing for more in-depth discussions alongside shorter check-ins, as appropriate to claimants' needs.

Accommodating individual circumstances

Work coaches are expected to tailor their support to each individual. However, our evidence shows that personal circumstances are sometimes overlooked or downplayed. The discretion to alter work-related requirements based on complex needs is also not always exercised. This section explores particular problems faced by people with caring responsibilities, people with health conditions and older claimants.

Time constraints

Many claimants have complex needs and it can be difficult for work coaches to address all of the barriers to work that claimants face within their appointments. This is partly related to the limited time work coaches can spend on individual claimants. Appointments typically last 10 minutes and are dominated by claimants demonstrating compliance with their claimant commitments. This means that the meetings are largely administrative. A considerable part of the appointments can also be spent on explaining the system itself, for example how to log into the UC journal. These technical aspects take up valuable time.

One of our advisers told us that short appointments are particularly difficult for people with communication difficulties and language barriers. They often need more time to ask questions and discuss issues. Finding a translator can also take up valuable appointment time.

Work coaches do not always have time and expertise to address claimants' queries about the benefit system. Claimants also raise personal issues that affect their ability to work but do not directly relate to their work search. For example, claimants may raise issues relating to their housing benefit or NHS appointments. This means that meetings are sometimes spent discussing issues that go beyond the expected role of the work coach.

The use of advice services

Advice services are key to supporting claimants and many work coaches do refer claimants to services such as Citizens Advice, homelessness charities and law centres. Our advisers told us that some local Citizens Advice offices have strong

relationships with the relationship managers at their local Jobcentres. This is beneficial because the staff within these Jobcentres had strong awareness of the advice available at local advice providers and made frequent referrals. In these places, our advisers were also able to more quickly address Jobcentre related issues as they had a clear point of contact and a positive working relationship.

One adviser told us that they have a Help to Claim adviser based at their local Jobcentre. This had allowed the local Citizens Advice office to support people more quickly, as work coaches could directly send claimants to speak to an adviser. They also told us that the Jobcentre had fewer complaints since having an adviser on site. They gave an example of a pensioner who had no money for 3 months because their UC had been closed. This person had reached pension age but hadn't been told to apply for their pension. The adviser at the Jobcentre was able to make the pension application by phone with the claimant there and then. They also referred them on to the main Citizens Advice service to access foodbank and fuel vouchers.

In other areas, we found that Relationship Managers were focused on employers and local training providers. While these relationships are vital for Jobcentres, relationships with advice providers were somewhat lacking. Staff in these Jobcentres were less aware of local advice services, which could make it more difficult to make referrals when needed.

Recommendations:

- There should be an information point in each Jobcentre with a designated Jobcentre employee available to offer technical benefits advice outside of the appointment.
- DWP should ensure that Relationship Managers within Jobcentres consistently work with advice providers to increase two-way communication. This could involve Jobcentres and advice services each providing a named point of contact, so that they have a direct relationship.
- DWP should increase referrals and funding to advice providers, such as homelessness charities, law centres and Citizens Advice. This would help

to relieve Jobcentres from queries they are often not equipped to deal with.

- DWP should pilot co-location of advice services within Jobcentres to offer claimants quick access to support that goes beyond the work coach remit.

Inappropriate conditionality

A common thread throughout the interviews was work coaches not accommodating claimants' personal situations, for example health conditions, caring responsibilities or age. A concerning example is that claimant commitments weren't always tailored to claimants' needs. Half of our advisers surveyed said they had had a client in the last six months who was asked to meet inappropriate conditions, for example being asked to look for work when they aren't well enough.

Rules around conditionality are not always applied correctly or consistently. One claimant reported that her work coach asked her to provide fit notes, even though the reason she could not undertake certain jobs was the increasing need to care for her mum rather than illness.

When people have complex needs that affect their ability to search for work, such as in cases of domestic violence, work coaches should apply conditionality easements. This can involve lowering or removing conditionality requirements for a period of time.

Respecting individual circumstances is not limited to easements. Claimants' needs should be taken into account when devising day-to-day requirements, scheduling appointments and suggesting career paths. Although we have seen many examples of good practice, our evidence indicates there is still a significant problem with work coaches disregarding, downplaying and dismissing personal circumstances.

Health conditions

The WCA is a gateway to alternative work-search arrangements for people with health conditions. Claimants are assessed to have 'Limited Capability for Work

and Work Related Activity' (LCWRA), or 'Limited Capability for Work' (LCW) status, or to be 'fit for work'. LCWRA exempts claimants from all work search requirements, and LCW reduces work search requirements¹².

Work coaches often rely on this assessment to determine which requirements are appropriate to ask of claimants. There are three problems with this:

- 1. There are people who do not meet the threshold for LCWRA and LCW, but have conditions that still affect their ability to apply for and undertake work.**

A commonly reported problem was that work coaches lack understanding and don't provide easements for many health issues and disabilities. This is particularly the case for invisible illnesses, mental health problems, arthritis, recovery from surgery or diabetes. Some interviewees reported work coaches downplaying these conditions and allowing little consideration for barriers they faced.

"I'm in a particularly difficult situation because my problems are largely mental health-related. [...] I mean, it's difficult to explain to mental health professionals, to be honest, but explaining it then to people who are not mental health professionals, who also have an agenda, which is to minimise how much money I get from them. It becomes quite a stressful game, and it shouldn't be a game at all. I should be able to be open and honest about my problems, and not worry about everything I say, or the punctuation I use, or anything like that, just in case it enables them to make a decision that's entirely detrimental to my interests." - UC Claimant

- 2. The possibility of having a WCA is sometimes not communicated to claimants.**

Some of the interviewees reported going to the Jobcentre regularly, despite serious health conditions affecting their functionality. 2 of our interviewees were never informed about the UC50 form¹³: one of them found out by their own initiative, and the other was advised by their Citizens Advice adviser. Another interviewee was asked to fill in the UC50 form, but was never actually referred to undertake a WCA.

¹² People in this group are not expected to look for jobs immediately, but can be asked to undertake some training and improve employability skills to prepare for work in the future.

¹³ The form claimants fill out to trigger a WCA assessment, which can result in a change of conditionality group, i.e. removal or relaxation of work search requirements.

DWP guidance stipulates that “in most cases, claimants are referred for WCA at day 29 of their health condition related claim”¹⁴. Claimants are prompted to talk about their health, and its impact on their ability to work, on the initial UC form. But the subsequent process for WCA referrals is not uniform and the 29 day deadline is not always observed. It is the responsibility of work coaches to inform claimants about the LCW or LCWRA groups and support them throughout the necessary steps to complete the WCA. However, there is no formal process to ensure this happens.

Liam* claims UC and Personal Independence Payment (PIP). He has been diagnosed with an unstable personality disorder, which makes social interactions difficult for him. His GP also suspects a heart condition and has signed him off work.

Recently, Liam was sanctioned for missing a Jobcentre appointment, leaving him without money and forcing him to apply for hardship payments. He was sanctioned again after missing a phone appointment because his phone was broken. At this point, his UC payment was just over £50 for the whole month.

When Liam came to us, he shared that he didn’t understand the sanction process and wasn’t informed how they were calculated. We helped him review the rules and encouraged him to request a WCA to adjust his claimant commitment to better match his work capacity.

*All names have been changed

3. There are long waiting times between identifying a need for a WCA and getting a decision.

Many of the people we help face significant delays in the WCA process¹⁵. For one of our interviewees, waiting for a WCA and its outcome took 2 years.

Between the start of the claim and the outcome of the WCA, the degree to which work coaches account for health conditions in work-related requirements is dependent on their discretion. This means that work coaches must make a judgement on what can be reasonably expected of claimants, often with limited

¹⁴ Work Capability Assessments guidance deposited [here](#).

¹⁵ Data on delays is not available for UC WCA, but for the Employment Support Allowance WCA, the median waiting time was 73 weekdays in June 2024.

training. Claimants are normally expected to bring fresh fit notes at least every 3 months, as this is the maximum time a fit note can cover. This can be very frustrating, especially for people with long term health issues.

Advisers also tell us that claimants often struggle with accessing fit notes from their GPs. There are also people who cannot access an online fit note and need someone to collect it from the GP and deliver it to the Jobcentre.

Issues within the NHS also cause challenges. Claimants often struggle to get timely doctors appointments, face administrative delays and aren't always able to access fit notes online.

Caring responsibilities

Claimants often reported that their caring responsibilities were overlooked by work coaches. Appointments were scheduled during school pick-ups and on very short notice, sometimes requiring claimants to arrange last minute childcare or take children home from school early. An adviser told us about a parent who needed to look after his children when his partner was taking a driving test. He was sanctioned for non-attendance despite giving notice to the DWP. Sadly, this seems to affect single parents and parents facing hardship the most. These people are less likely to have someone who can help out with care, or to be able to arrange paid care on short notice.

"[I remember] one lady who had 4 pounds left in her purse. [She] decided not to buy the bus ticket to the appointment and try to actually go and buy some milk and bread for her children. And she was sanctioned." - Citizens Advice Adviser

It seems there is insufficient training for work coaches on how to accommodate caring responsibilities. A lot of people who come to us for help face difficulties finding affordable childcare, while dealing with pressure from the Jobcentre. Some single parents are allowed to have fewer work coach appointments and don't need to be available for work for as many hours per week as other claimants¹⁶. Yet, some of our advisers reported work coaches being unaware, or not informing claimants, of these easements.

¹⁶ From October 2023, lead carers of children aged 1 need to see work coaches once every 3 months. For parents of children aged 2, it is required every month. Parents of children over the age of 3 need to be available to work 30 hours per week. More information [here](#).

Age

Some claimants over 50 years old expressed frustration that work coaches do not understand their unique experiences of the labour market, which they perceived as discriminatory. They felt that their age was not accepted as a barrier to finding work and felt patronised when expressing such difficulties, especially by younger work coaches.

"I just said 'your age works against you'. [The work coach] disputed that and said that 'that's just in your head.'" - UC Claimant

One of the interviewees described their experience of the +50 interview¹⁷ with her work coach. They wanted to discuss the jobs available and the fact that many positions advertised seem suitable, but on closer reading indicated a lot of lifting and moving of furniture. Their work coach only gave generic advice about work, health and money and a referral to a "simple" website, lacking relevant information¹⁸. This suggests that work coaches may need additional training in how to support older claimants and provide tailored job search advice.

People in severe hardship

People in severe hardship might be less likely to benefit from other support provided by the Jobcentre. One of our interviewees recalls being sent on multi-day external training and not being able to afford lunch in-between sessions. They reported that other participants were also skipping food.

A similar pattern exists in relation to homeless people. Our advisers frequently help this group, who tend to be sanctioned for missing appointments notified via email or journal which they cannot see due to not being able to access the Internet.

"Ultimately, poverty should not be a reason why people are getting sanctioned. And that's what we're seeing." - Citizens Advice adviser

¹⁷ A Jobcentre meeting for those over 50, intended to help with looking for jobs, organising finances and monitoring health.

¹⁸ Interviewee clarified it was the following website:
<https://jobhelp.campaign.gov.uk/midlifemot/home-page/>

Recommendations:

- There should be a statutory easement pausing conditionality for people who are homeless.
- There should be lunch allowance or lunch provided at all DWP-organised training days and courses.

EDI and discrimination

The recently published sanctions statistics suggested that Black and other ethnic minorities are disproportionately more likely to be sanctioned than White claimants¹⁹. However, the DWP's most recent statistics release does not indicate any significant differences in sanctions rates between ethnic groups²⁰. Similarly, our own data²¹ shows that the ethnic groups of those we help are comparable across those with conditionality issues, UC issues and our clients overall. This data shows a change from our research in 2023 when there were disproportionately more racially minoritised people coming to us for help with conditionality and sanctions.

The evidence from our interviews suggests that explicit discrimination is very rare. Most of the advisers we spoke to had seen no examples of discrimination by work coaches. One person noted that it used to be more of an issue but had improved in recent years.

In our survey of advisers, 12% said they had seen clients who they thought may have been discriminated against by work coaches or DWP in relation to conditionality or sanctions. While this is a minority, it is concerning that 1 in 8 of our advisers have come across this issue. When specifying what examples of discrimination they had seen, our advisers most often raised concerns relating to health and disabilities, including mental health. Race, language barriers and learning difficulties were also mentioned.

A concerning incident regarding religion was also reported to us in an interview. One work coach made disapproving comments about the claimant's approach to

¹⁹ Benefit Sanctions statistics to May 2024 available [here](#).

²⁰ Benefit Sanctions statistics to August 2024 available [here](#)

²¹ 1 November 2023 to 31 October 2024

religious holidays and other elements of observance (they were both of the same faith). For example, they asked the claimant about their decision not to wear religious symbols. Combined with previous negative interactions, this made the claimant scared of attending the Jobcentre. They felt they were subject to discrimination and bullying. The claimant also mentioned they were threatened with sanctions when raising a complaint.

Service design

This section describes the impact that DWP service design has on work coaches' relationships with claimants. We identify technical and accessibility issues with communication through the UC journal, as well as the way that work coaches arrange appointments. Finally, we discuss the negative impressions that claimants have of the Jobcentre environment.

Communications

Our participants frequently mentioned the quality of DWP communication as an issue. Over 60%²² of our advisers surveyed have seen at least one case of poor communication by work coaches or DWP, such as not responding to claimants' messages in the last 6 months. One issue is the UC journal, which is not always an intuitive tool.

Some claimants felt that messages on the journal were not read by their work coaches. One of our clients received a sanction for missing an appointment when they were in hospital. They told our advisers they had tried to inform the Jobcentre about the change of circumstances but the message had not received a reply. This meant that for the subsequent month, they only received £24 of UC.

Grace* recently lost her agency job, marking her first period of unemployment in 30 years. Since then, she applied for 47 jobs and attended several interviews, but most positions required a photo ID, which she didn't have. She reached out multiple times to her work coach via the Universal Credit (UC) journal to ask about financial assistance for obtaining an ID but received no response to these specific messages. Other inquiries in the journal were answered, leaving her requests for ID support unaddressed. Eventually, the issue was resolved in a face-to-face meeting, but the delayed response heightened Grace's anxiety and added to family tension.

²² 161 out of 254.

Recommendation: Work coaches should be required to reply to UC messages within a specified timeframe. The UC journal should be adjusted to allow all users to see when messages have been delivered and read, and to incorporate reminders when a response is overdue.

Some claimants told us that journal notifications are not always reliable, which can lead to them missing important messages. One claimant reported being sanctioned because they missed an appointment they hadn't received a notification for. They had previously been sanctioned for missing an appointment, after their contact preferences were changed on the system. They successfully challenged this via mandatory reconsideration.

Issues with internet access can create additional challenges for some claimants in communicating with their work coaches. One of the UC claimants we interviewed didn't have internet access at home and wasn't allowed to call the Jobcentre directly. This meant that if they had an emergency, they had to get through to the UC phone line to leave a message, which normally took around half an hour. It also meant they had problems with viewing and replying to any notification posted on his UC journal.

Evidence suggests that such digital exclusion is relatively commonplace, especially amongst older people²³. People without internet access can make a phone claim rather than an online claim, but only when they first apply. This means that people who lose regular internet access or struggle with the journal are unable to switch to a phone claim later on.

Phone claims are also difficult to manage for people with certain health issues. For example, one person came to us for help because, due to memory loss, they couldn't access either the UC journal or phone calls, as they struggled to answer the security questions.

One claimant we interviewed said they requested notifications via text messages, and this was accommodated. Jobcentres should consistently apply such flexibility and make sure the default mode of communication is appropriate for each claimant.

²³ Age UK statistics release from April 2024 available [here](#).

Arranging appointments

Appointment timings came up frequently in our conversations with claimants. Many Jobcentres and individual work coaches already apply good practices and are flexible with scheduling the appointments. They discuss the times with claimants and always try to reschedule via phone call, rather than through a journal message.

However, a commonly reported issue was that some work coaches schedule appointments with very little notice or in a way that clashes with claimants' pre-existing commitments. Appointment times are communicated via the UC journal, which is not easily accessible for everyone. Although claimants normally get a text message notifying them about new journal messages, they need to log in to the journal to see if there are any changes to their upcoming appointments. Some reported difficulties accessing this information due to a lack of internet access or digital skills.

Jobcentre staff told us that the standard rule is that appointments shouldn't be scheduled less than 48 hours in advance, unless there is explicit permission from the claimant. If that does happen, a sanction for non-attendance should not be applied. However, on occasion, these rules are not followed. One of our interviewees recalled a time when they put a reminder of a meeting in their diary, but forgot to include the time. They checked the journal as soon as they could in the morning, to find that the appointment was originally at 2:30pm, but that morning it had been moved to 10:30am the same day.

"I have to check my journal 3 times a day just in case they change their appointment. It's ridiculous. Then they drive me to madness with all this. And then I just became sick, you know, I was so stressed." - UC Claimant

Some claimants also told us that their requests for phone appointments were refused, even if their health prevented them from attending. For example, one of our interviewees had a phone call request refused when she was in a hospital.

"Some work coaches told me, they'll only reschedule if it's, like, a funeral of a close family member, really close. [...] I think the way they do it is: if you're not available when we click our fingers, it means you're not available for work. That's the thinking behind it, I believe." - UC Claimant

Mary* is disabled and receives PIP and UC. She had a work coach appointment scheduled, but 2 journal entries gave conflicting information about whether it would be online or face to face. Worried she would miss it, she contacted her local Citizens Advice and got confirmation it would be on the phone. Her work coach didn't call, so Mary put a message on her UC journal. Over 3 hours after the appointment, she received a message that it was going to be late, followed by a missed call and a note that she had missed the appointment. Mary was worried all weekend, but we were able to help her explain the situation and rearrange her appointment for 2 days later.

The requirement that work coach appointments are face-to-face by default was a significant barrier to engagement for many of the claimants we spoke to. The journey to the Jobcentre was often time consuming and expensive, and could be particularly challenging for those with health issues and caring responsibilities. Some interviewees also viewed the journey time as excessive, given the short duration of the appointment. As discussed above, mixing longer in-person and shorter phone appointments would allow claimants to have an in-depth conversation when they do come to the Jobcentre. There could also be more use of video meetings.

It was suggested by some Jobcentre staff that moving to the hybrid model of working could also relieve some pressure off the work coaches and become more accessible for claimants. They felt that this change could also make Jobcentres a more attractive place to work for its employees.

Recommendations:

- The government should continue the trial of hybrid working, with a view to making hybrid working available to all work coaches.
- Video and phone appointments should be offered routinely to claimants.
- There should be a portal (or option on the UC journal) where claimants can see/accept/cancel their job-centre appointments. If not accepted, contact should be made to ensure the claimant can make it.

Atmosphere of Jobcentres

A number of claimants we spoke to told us that the Jobcentre environment has a negative impact on their appointments. Interviewees described their local Jobcentres as 'depressing', 'demeaning' and 'stressful'. One person told us she dreads going there because of the atmosphere.

Some highlighted the high numbers of security staff, who they saw as intimidating and made them feel unwelcome. One claimant told us they felt anxious around the 2 security guards at his Jobcentre. They said, "I feel like a criminal. Like I've done something wrong, just by being a Jobseeker." These experiences can mean that claimants are stressed and uncomfortable at their appointments, putting more strain on their relationship with their work coach.

"The Jobcentre I go to, its nickname's Fort Knox because the security's that tight there. Because they look you up and down when you go in, they radio upstairs that Mr. X is coming up. And then when you go upstairs, there's somebody standing at the door and they're saying Mr. X has arrived and everything." - UC Claimant

Variations in the friendliness of the staff, particularly security, meant that claimants at different Jobcentres had very different perceptions of their visits. A couple of interviewees directly compared 2 jobcentres they visited. Whilst the first one was a "horrible" experience, he perceived the second one as much more positive. He felt claimants were treated as "human beings" and he appreciated that the security staff were friendly and called him "sir".

Privacy was a key concern for many claimants. The limited space and lack of dividers between desks at Jobcentres made claimants feel exposed. In March 2024, only around 30% of the Jobcentre network had one or more private interview rooms available for work focused interviews²⁴.

"What I don't like is that it's all in the open. You can hear everything." - UC Claimant

During work coach appointments, people are often expected to share private details of their lives. The perception that other people in the Jobcentre can listen to what is being said makes this process more difficult. Seeing people waiting can also add to the pressure on claimants to finish their appointments on time

²⁴ Freedom of information request from 12 April 2024 available [here](#).

and not go into the details of their situation. It also means that one loud incident can disrupt other appointments and negatively affect the atmosphere.

Recommendation: All Jobcentres should provide a sufficient number of private rooms that claimants can request for their appointments when needed.

Employment Support

A fundamental part of the work coach role is to provide employment support to UC claimants. Work coaches are responsible for helping people to move closer to work, find jobs and increase their hours. Our research shows that currently the employment support offered is limited and, in some cases, counter-productive. This chapter explores the effectiveness of employment support provided in Jobcentres through external courses and the FSF.

Jobs that don't fit

A common theme from both our advisers and UC claimants was the pressure to apply for jobs that didn't match claimants' skills, experience and goals. This has previously been defined as the 'any job' or 'ABC' approach²⁵. The assumption is that by moving to 'any job', claimants would gain experience to progress to a 'better job' and then a 'career'²⁶. However, research²⁷ suggests that this doesn't work in practice. Claimants often either get stuck in precarious employment or return to UC.

One claimant told us that the emphasis on getting 'any job' was demotivating. They had a part time job and were completing a part time master's degree, but their work coach still asked them to increase their hours. However, the jobs on the Jobcentre's website were very limited and didn't match their level of skills and experience.

The recent Get Britain Working white paper hinted at moving away from the 'ABC' approach. It proposed focusing on creating opportunities for finding "secure, rewarding and fulfilling work". However, it also pledged to maintain conditionality. Sanctions will still apply if claimants "refuse to meet reasonable requirements agreed with their work coaches". It is important there is flexibility in interpreting what is reasonable, to make sure people are not pressured into unsuitable jobs.

²⁵ Introduced as an official policy in 2022 (press release available [here](#)).

²⁶ [DWP guidance](#) on 'job goals' states that claimants are required "to look for and take any job that they are capable of doing that pays the National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage or above".

²⁷ For example, Katy Jones, 'Idleness' and a new approach to employment policy' in IPPR Progressive Review Volume 29, Issue 3-4 Winter 2022, available [here](#).

DWP guidance²⁸ normally allows claimants to search for jobs in their previous profession for between 1 and 4 weeks from the start of their UC claim. Many claimants find that this is not enough time to explore their options and go through lengthy recruitment processes. After this period, people are expected to look for and take on any job they 'can do'. Work coaches sometimes then disregard individual preferences completely. Often, the permitted period is not applied in practice.

Recommendation: Claimants should be given more time to find a role that matches their experience and career development. A permitted period of at least 4 weeks should be considered for all claimants.

Whilst many work coaches do their best to accommodate people's experience and aspirations, our research showed that some pressure claimants to pursue unsuitable jobs. Our interviewees described this as "nagging" and said their work coaches sent them jobs they viewed as unsustainable in the longer term. This included jobs with high turnover of staff, unsuitable hours and limited job security.

"You've just got to apply for as many jobs as you can. Even if you don't have the experience... It's crazy. Because if you're not applying for jobs, they will make you apply for whatever they [want]. And that could be anything that could be the lowest paid job in London, the travel could be 10 miles away." - UC Claimant

It is important that work coaches encourage claimants to be realistic and open minded in their search for work. However, their main goal should be to support people into jobs they are suited for. Although this might delay their return to work, it could increase their chances of remaining in employment over the long term.

Some people told us they were referred for jobs they were physically incapable of doing, such as one claimant in her 50s, who had multiple health conditions including a bad back. They experienced continuous pressure from their work coach to apply for physically strenuous positions, some of which required operating heavy machinery. They were also sent to interviews for jobs they had

²⁸ 'Availability for work' guidance deposited [here](#).

no qualifications for. Another interviewee was sent to a trial day as a chef at a fast food chain, despite having had to leave their previous job due to arthritis.

“She just wouldn’t listen to me, she said, well, if you don’t go for this interview at [fast food chain], I’m going to sanction you. I was afraid of a sanction because I don’t have private means, so I was afraid I’d be cut off and have to apply for that hardship fund until I appealed the sanction with all the stress of that. So I basically wasted [fast food chain]’s time and wasted my time. And that was one experience of you know, the work coach, just not listening to what I was saying.” - UC Claimant

Recommendation: Rather than Jobcentres applying a strict ‘any job’ paradigm, a more flexible and personalised approach should be developed. This would balance the value of work experience and the importance of minimising time away from the labour market, against supporting claimants to find work that is most likely to be sustainable over the long term.

External training

Referrals for external courses form a large part of the employment support offered by Jobcentres. The main training programme used by Jobcentres is Restart. The goal of Restart is to provide “intensive and tailored support” to help claimants into “sustained employment”²⁹. Restart has had 720,000 referrals since its launch in June 2021³⁰. 140,000 participants have either reached a particular earnings threshold or 6 months of gainful self-employment³¹. Restart delivery is outsourced to 8 providers nationwide, who receive referrals directly from the Jobcentres. One work coach told us that it is standard practice that people who are out of work for 6 months are referred to Restart.

Some people we spoke to really valued the support from Restart providers, highlighting its more in depth approach than Jobcentre. One interviewee said they felt Restart providers were on her side. Others pointed to useful training on interview techniques and CVs. Another claimant described the course as comprehensive, with the staff determined to find them a suitable job and eventually succeeding.

²⁹ Restart Scheme statistics to April 2024 available [here](#)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ 140,000 outcomes constituted 92% of the contractual expectation.

However, a common feeling was that, like the Jobcentre, Restart sometimes came across as cursory and impersonal. The main concerns were that the course was too general and did little to help people find work. Participants also didn't receive any further qualifications to support their job search. Others also reported Restart failing to reflect the experience and needs of the participants. There was a sense that claimants were sometimes sent on the training course even when it wasn't suitable. One person remarked that Jobcentres "just shove everyone off to Restart."

The practicalities of attending Restart were also not always taken into account. One person we helped was told that they would be able to choose courses around their childcare obligations, and some of them would be online. When they enrolled on the course, it was apparent that there was no flexibility in timing and that they needed to attend face to face.

We also found issues with a lack of communication between Restart and Jobcentres. Work coaches did not always tell Restart about claimants' individual circumstances and availability. Jobcentres were also not updated on Restart schedules, so some claimants' work coach appointments clashed with their training.

"[Restart] don't know what the work coach is doing. They have their own leaders and it [does] not coincide, it's not connected. Then I don't even know why I'm on this Restart programme because they have workshops 'how to make a CV' but I said I already have a CV, I am applying. So why do I have to attend it? 'Well this has been ordered by the Jobcentre [...]. So you must attend all the workshops. No matter if you need it or not.' So I think that's just a waste of public money to be honest." - UC Claimant

Recommendations:

- There should be more collaboration between Restart and UC. For example, schedules should be clearly visible on the Universal Credit journal so work coaches can monitor people's availability and progress.
- Information about personal circumstances, job preferences and training to date should be automatically sent to Restart.

- Work coaches should be encouraged to use their discretion and only send people on Restart if it is a suitable way to support them.

Other training issues

Work coaches have discretion to refer claimants for a range of courses. However, we found inconsistencies in the courses people were sent on. While some training courses were valued by participants, we also heard that the content of training was not always relevant. One of the former work coaches we interviewed said they felt pressure from managers to fill the courses even when they did not deem them appropriate.

Bethany* is British but spent years abroad speaking mostly French. She is fluent in French and would like to explore career options as a translator. She communicated this to her work coach, but was informed that in order to qualify for translation courses, she would need to complete a language course first. She was told it was impossible for her to take an exam straight away. She enrolled and attended French classes for one year, despite knowing the material, just to learn that the funding for translation courses was cut and she would not be able to participate after all.

Some people we spoke to came to the Jobcentre with development goals, but did not feel supported towards them. One person we spoke to had previous experience in the public sector and aspired to get a job in the civil service. They identified the STAR interviewing method³² and computer skills as two areas for improvement, but were not offered any courses that could cover them. They also wanted help with updating their CV, but were told all spaces on CV training had already been filled. They received no support in identifying or registering for any courses and, instead, independently found a CV course organised by their local community centre. They felt let down by the system and disappointed, especially given the high expectations set by the work coach.

³² A structured technique of responding to interview questions based on discussing the situation, task, action, and result.

"I haven't been sat down and told 'this is what we can do for you'. It's almost like they're waiting for you to ask the questions and if you don't know what question to ask, you are not going to know. Because it's not been offered." - UC Claimant

Recommendation: Jobcentres should work with local authorities and other stakeholders to collate and update a list of internal and external training. This list should be made generally available to claimants.

Some claimants told us they wanted a clearer plan of how to find work in their desired profession after attending a course. One person told their work coach that they wanted to work in security and was referred for relevant training. However, at the end of the course there was no follow up or clear plan for how to find security work. This meant they were left to apply for jobs in other fields that they were less interested in.

"So one thing I'm going to say is: if they put people on courses, so like for me on the SIA [Security Industry Authority] course. Surely, there should be something after that. So I've done my course, I completed it, won a trophy, outstanding student and all this kind of stuff. And then nothing, just to keep applying for jobs." - UC Claimant

Recommendation: Work coaches should work with claimants to create a long-term plan of how to find work in their preferred field. This should include addressing any barriers to work and filling gaps in experience.

The Jobcentres we visited offered claimants specialist work support. These specialists included:

- Complex needs work coaches responsible for the most vulnerable claimants;
- 16-24 specialists and Youth Employability Coaches
- Self-employment specialists
- Disability employment advisers
- In-house employment psychologists (providing support with overcoming barriers, training and consultation support for work coaches)
- Advanced Customer Service teams for more holistic support

These specialised roles are central to DWP's work to tailor their support for different needs and go beyond tick-box support. As DWP carries out Jobcentre reforms, it is important that this specialist support is expanded to reach as many claimants as possible.

Writing the claimant commitment

The claimant commitment is a document setting out what claimants are expected to do in order to receive their benefits. This may include a set number of hours they are expected to spend looking for work or specific training courses they need to attend. Our research showed that the process of writing a claimant commitment isn't consistent for all claimants.

The guidance on writing a claimant commitment says that there is no "one size fits all" approach and each commitment needs to be tailored to people's individual circumstances³³. Where needed, work coaches have discretion to reduce the work search hours or job applications that are required of claimants. They can also switch off conditionality entirely where people have significant health issues or other barriers to work.

Our research found that in practice these agreements are often generic and some claimants do not know that they exist. Instead of a tailored plan of action, we heard that in some cases claimant commitments are presented to claimants at their first Jobcentre visit as a non-negotiable set of conditions that need to be met, at risk of sanctions. While many work coaches do adapt claimant commitments to their claimants' needs, they sometimes struggle to review them regularly enough to reflect claimants' changing circumstances.

Over 40% of our local advisers surveyed in October reported that in the last 6 months they had seen a client who didn't understand their claimant commitment. One adviser told us that claimant commitments are often very sparse on detail and they hadn't seen them being made flexible to claimants' circumstances.

During one of our Jobcentre visits we were able to observe a claimant commitment meeting and talk about it with work coaches and team leaders. The

³³ Claimant commitment overview guidance, deposited [here](#).

appointment was constructive and individualised, although the claimant appeared confused and overwhelmed by all the rules.

The Jobcentre had a detailed 3-page checklist which included questions about the claimant's background and barriers to work; an explanation of the payments and the journal; setting up expectations; and discussing conditionality. It prompted questions about whether claimants have a valid ID, interview clothes and an internet connection. This seemed to be a very useful tool, but we were told that it was developed locally so other Jobcentres may not use a checklist like this.

Our advisers have seen cases where claimant commitments don't follow DWP guidance. One person came to us for help after their claimant commitment appointment. They had a 3 year old son, was awaiting an autism diagnosis, and had experienced domestic violence. Their memory and mental health had been affected by her former partner's violence. Despite providing fit notes as evidence of this, they were told by their work coach to deal with the default requirements. According to DWP guidance³⁴, work-related requirements should be paused for 13 weeks in such circumstances.

In theory, claimants are allowed to shape their commitments. However, whilst most of our interviewees recalled signing something at the beginning of their claim, many did not feel they were able to contribute to its content. There needs to be a shift towards a more collaborative process, where claimants feel comfortable requesting changes and be sure these will be applied.

Phone claimants can be at a particular disadvantage as they are asked to sign the commitment during the first meeting. This means they have less time to understand and reflect on what they are committing to. Online claimants have 7 days to view and sign their claimant commitment.

Flexible Support Fund

The FSF is a fund that work coaches can use to support claimants with the additional costs of finding a job. This fund could be spent on removing barriers

³⁴ UC Domestic abuse guidance available [here](#).

to work (46% of expenditure in the year 2023/24), training (34%) or childcare (11%)³⁵. We heard from numerous claimants that this support is hugely valuable.

The importance of this option cannot be overstated, for 2 main reasons. Firstly, it recognises that people on very low incomes do not have resources to pay for the basic costs of securing a job. For example, people may need to renew a passport or travel to an interview. Secondly, the FSF can help the Jobcentre to show claimants they are genuinely supporting them into work, rather than solely monitoring compliance. Based on the interviews, this seemed to also have a positive impact on the trust in the system overall.

Our interviewees recalled the fund being particularly useful for funding travel, interview clothes and haircuts, and renewal of documents. However, unless suggested by the work coaches, many claimants were not aware of the FSF. In a survey of our advisers, three quarters (74%) said most or all of the people they help are unaware they can ask their work coach for money from the FSF³⁶.

In our interviews, we also came across one worrying example. One claimant told their work coach that he needed clothes for an upcoming interview. The work coach said they could offer them a loan (even though FSF grants do not need to be repaid) and asked them to make a list of items they would need. The claimant then used the Jobcentre computer to search for these items, but was criticised for doing so by another employee, and barred from using the computer without being given an opportunity to explain the situation. They did not end up buying any clothes.

On our Jobcentre visits, staff told us about a lack of training on the use of the FSF. We heard that there is currently no formal training in how it can be applied. Work coaches' knowledge of the fund is instead dependent on informal training provided within Jobcentres. While many work coaches find it a valuable tool to support claimants, it is inconsistently applied due to a lack of understanding of when and how it can be used. 90% of our advisers surveyed in November 2024 agreed that the lack of awareness and publicity is a significant barrier in applying for it.

³⁵ FOIA request from the 7 November 2024 available [here](#).

³⁶ Survey conducted in November 2024 with 42 respondents.

FSF was historically underspent, until the financial year of 2022/23 where all of the available budget was used³⁷. Given how valuable this support is for claimants, expanding its use should be a key priority.

Recommendations:

- DWP should increase investment in the Flexible Support Fund.
- DWP should introduce formal training for work coaches on the use of the Flexible Support Fund.

³⁷ FOIA request from the 7 November 2024 available [here](#).

Impact of benefit sanctions

Many of the issues in this report are caused or exacerbated by DWP's approach to conditionality. While the recent white paper recognised that there is currently "too much emphasis on compliance" at the expense of personalised support, it also renewed its commitment to sanctions³⁸. This research suggests that these two aims aren't fully compatible. For the reforms to succeed, the government should rethink conditionality.

Research suggests that conditionality can harm employment outcomes. A recent DWP report found that sanctions "decrease the rate of exit into higher paid work, while the exit rate into some kind of work is not greatly affected"³⁹. Other studies highlighted the catastrophic impact sanctions can have on mental health⁴⁰ and financial stability⁴¹, leading to cycles of debt, destitution and evictions. Our own data supports this. 39% of people who come to our local offices for advice in relation to sanctions also required a foodbank referral⁴².

"95% of the job of the [work coach] interview was looking for controls to see if I was going to be sanctioned and about 5% was having a discussion about helping you to find a job. [...] So I thought that the work coach's job should be to coach me towards the job market and look at my CV and help me to find things to look for. And she was leaving me to sink or swim to find jobs for myself" - UC Claimant

The work coach's role has 2 conflicting aims. On the one hand, they support people into work, which requires an understanding of the complex life experiences and unique barriers they face. On the other hand, they monitor compliance with claimant commitments and make sanctions referrals. The latter role can create a problematic power dynamic. A number of claimants told us that they felt the risk of sanctions undermined trust in their relationships with their work coaches.

³⁸ Get Britain Working white paper at paragraph 145, available [here](#).

³⁹ DWP, The Impact of Benefit Sanctions on Employment Outcomes: draft report, published 6 April 2023, available [here](#).

⁴⁰ For example, Evan Williams, 'Punitive welfare reform and claimant mental health: The impact of benefit sanctions on anxiety and depression', available [here](#).

⁴¹ For example, the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee's report on Benefit Sanctions, 2018, Nineteenth Report of Session 2017–19, available [here](#).

⁴² Based on our data from 1st January 2023 to 29th November 2024. This is compared to 24% of conditionality clients and 9% of all clients in that time.

"They don't care about me, they're not my friend, they're essentially the benefit police and I'm not under any illusions that that's what they are. They're forever waiting for me to commit an offence and that's how I feel. So, it annoys me that they have this power over me and then if they tell me to jump, I have to do it." - UC claimant

Even if not explicitly mentioned, sanctions remain the elephant in the room during interactions with work coaches. Some claimants felt that they needed to be careful about every word they say to avoid negative reactions from work coaches, and accept any suggestions, even if they disagreed. This imbalance of power can hinder meaningful conversation and shift the claimant's priority from engaging with support to avoiding a sanction referral.

"I don't want to come across as being, like, work shy when you don't want to question things too much because you may be put down as being difficult. I'm not saying you would be but it's a game you've got to be into, you've got to be careful what you say to them as well." - UC claimant

The fear of sanctions led some claimants to repeatedly check their UC journals for appointment notifications. Compliance would often take priority over other responsibilities. One of our interviewees felt they had to pick up their children from school early to make sure they made it to their appointment on time. In some cases this fear dominated the relationship between work coaches and claimants, overshadowing the support provided. One work coach also noted that referring a claimant for a sanction often permanently damages their relationship.

Sanctions occasionally lead to perverse situations. One person who came to us for help had a Jobcentre appointment scheduled for the same day as a trial shift with a potential employer. Upon raising the issue with their work coach, they were told that they would still need to attend the work coach appointment. They came to us for help because both missing the work-focused interview and not showing up for a trial shift could end up in a sanction. Our adviser suggested they escalate the complaint by writing in their journal and requesting the attention of the manager.

This situation is not a one-off. Claimants are not always able to rearrange their work coach meetings and have had to miss other appointments, including

Restart sessions. Sanctions mean that work coach appointments can become disproportionately significant.

Claimants we interviewed told us they believed work coaches are pressured to meet targets on how many sanctions they should apply. However, it isn't DWP policy to set targets for sanctions. Some claimants also reported hearing rumours about people being sanctioned incorrectly. Hearing such stories causes problems both for UC claimants and Jobcentre staff. One of the work coaches we spoke to remarked that this reduces claimants' trust that work coaches are able and willing to help.

Due to the relatively low rates of UC, combined with the high cost of living, many claimants face financial hardship. Our advisers regularly support people who face the choice between buying food and paying for transport to get to their Jobcentre appointment. Sadly, this group is then left even worse off if sanctioned for non-attendance. A sanction itself can be a reason why claimants cannot afford a fare to the appointment.

DWP staff told us it is their policy that claimants shouldn't be sanctioned if they are at risk of financial hardship. However, our previous research⁴³ has shown that this is not always followed. Sanctioned claimants are too often unable to make ends meet, meaning they need assistance such as fuel and foodbank vouchers. Claimants can apply for a hardship payment if they face financial difficulties, but this money must be repaid by claimants out of future UC payments. These repayments can cause future financial difficulties and discourage some of the people we help from applying.

Recommendations:

- DWP should undertake a thorough review of the use of sanctions. Any evidence of effectiveness needs to be balanced against the need to treat people fairly and minimise harm.
- Sanctions, especially at the highest levels, should only apply to claimants who consistently fail to engage with the Jobcentre.

⁴³ Kate Harrison, 'The Sanction Spiral: The unequal impact and hardship caused by sanctions in Universal Credit', July 2023, available [here](#)

Sanctioned without a good reason

This research echoes a catalogue of previous studies describing how sanctions are sometimes incorrectly applied⁴⁴. 38% of our advisers surveyed in October reported seeing sanctions inappropriately or unfairly applied in the last six months.

To refer clients for a sanction, work coaches need to be satisfied that claimants broke their requirements without a good reason⁴⁵. Work coaches should use the journal to prompt claimants to explain why they have not met their conditions. In practice, it appears that some claimants do not receive these prompts, while others are sanctioned even when they provide a good reason. Some work coaches we spoke to said they try to call claimants before they record a missed appointment, but not all do this.

Even when sanctions are applied according to policy, they can be overly harsh. Some claimants felt that their UC was cut almost automatically for very minor missteps. Examples included a sanction for missing a phone appointment because the claimant's phone was on silent mode. Although they explained straight away and pointed out it was the first appointment missed in 4 years, they were still sanctioned.

Another person we spoke to was sanctioned for coming 20 minutes late for one appointment. They called to explain immediately after and attended the next available meeting (on the same day). They felt it was an honest mistake and that the response was out of proportion.

One interviewee reported having a sanction applied for not applying for a job they had been told to apply for. They had, in fact, applied for the job, but this wasn't acknowledged by the work coach. They challenged the decision but this wasn't accepted until the tribunal appeal, at which stage the sanction was reversed.

⁴⁴ For example, Welfare Conditionality Project 2013-2018, final report available [here](#), our previous research, "Sanctions Spiral: The unequal impact and hardship caused by sanctions in Universal Credit", Kate Harrison, 2023, available [here](#), or "Benefit Sanctions: A Presumption of Guilt", Caroline Selman, Public Law Project 2022, available [here](#).

⁴⁵ If a claimant doesn't meet their requirements three times, work coaches are obliged to refer them for a sanction even if they provide a good reason.

Recommendation: Claimants should be routinely contacted after a missed appointment via phone to verify the reason for lateness or non-attendance.

Policy recommendations

Safeguarding

1. Jobcentres should improve safeguarding, including through greater managerial oversight of work coaches' interactions with claimants.
2. Jobcentres should apply a uniform, reliable and discreet complaints process. The complaints process should be made clearly available to all claimants, including the option to escalate complaints to someone impartial outside of the Jobcentre.

Work coach training

3. DWP should improve training for work coaches on communication skills, including active listening and relationship building.
4. DWP should introduce formal training for work coaches on the use of the Flexible Support Fund.

Service design

5. Work coaches' caseloads should be reduced to allow for greater flexibility in their schedules, such as more breaks and preparation time.
6. DWP should review appointment durations and implement a more flexible system allowing for more in-depth discussions alongside shorter check-ins as appropriate to claimants' needs.
7. All Jobcentres should provide a sufficient number of private rooms that claimants can request for their appointments when needed.
8. Video and phone appointments should be offered routinely to claimants.
9. The government should continue the trial with a view to hybrid working being available to all work coaches.
10. There should be more collaboration between Restart and UC. For example, schedules should be clearly visible on the Universal Credit journal so work coaches can monitor people's availability and progress.
11. Information about personal circumstances, job preferences and training to date should be automatically sent to Restart.

12. There should be lunch allowance or lunch provided at all DWP-organised training days and courses.
13. DWP should increase investment in the Flexible Support Fund.

Advice services

14. There should be an information point in each Jobcentre with a designated Jobcentre employee available to offer technical benefits advice outside of the appointment.
15. DWP should ensure that Relationship Managers within Jobcentres consistently work with advice providers to increase two-way communication. This could involve Jobcentres and advice services each providing a named point of contact, so that they have a direct relationship.
16. DWP should increase referrals and funding to advice providers, such as homelessness charities, law centres and Citizens Advice. This would help to relieve Jobcentres from queries they are often not equipped to deal with.
17. DWP should pilot co-location of advice services within Jobcentres to offer claimants quick access to support that goes beyond the work coach remit.

Conditionality and sanctions

18. There should be a statutory easement pausing conditionality for people who are homeless.
19. DWP should undertake a thorough review of the use of sanctions. Any evidence of effectiveness needs to be balanced against the need to treat people fairly and minimise harm.
20. Sanctions, especially at the highest levels, should only apply to claimants who consistently fail to engage with the Jobcentre.
21. Claimants should be routinely contacted after a missed appointment via phone to verify the reason for lateness or non-attendance.

UC journal

22. Work coaches should be required to reply to UC messages within a specified timeframe. The UC journal should be adjusted to allow all users

to see when messages have been delivered and read, and to incorporate reminders when a response is overdue.

23. There should be a portal (or option on the UC journal) where claimants can see/accept/cancel their job-centre appointments. If not accepted, contact should be made to ensure the claimant can make it.

Employment support

24. Rather than Jobcentres applying a strict 'any job' paradigm, a more flexible and personalised approach should be developed. This would balance the value of work experience and the importance of minimising time away from the labour market, against supporting claimants to find work that is most likely to be sustainable over the long term.
25. Claimants should be given more time to find a role that matches their experience and career development. A permitted period of at least 4 weeks should be considered for all claimants.
26. Jobcentres should work with local authorities and other stakeholders to collate and update a list of internal and external training. This list should be made generally available to claimants.
27. Work coaches should be encouraged to use their discretion and only send people on Restart if it is a suitable way to support them.
28. A 'support plan' complementing claimant commitments should be introduced to formally identify the support that claimants can expect to receive from the Jobcentre.
29. Work coaches should work with claimants to create a long-term plan of how to find work in their preferred field. This should include addressing any barriers to work and filling gaps in experience.

Conclusion

Work coaches have a key role in supporting claimants into work and guiding their overall experience of Universal Credit. This research has shown that they often aren't able to provide meaningful employment support due to having limited resources and prioritising compliance.

Work coaches have very high workloads, which means appointments are short and they are less able to provide personalised support. Claimants too often see different work coaches, undermining any relationships they do manage to build. Jobcentre visits are very short and often dominated by technical inquiries about payments or other priorities, unrelated to employment. This means that claimants often don't find them worthwhile, especially if they have a long journey to get there or have health conditions that make it strenuous.

Claimants feel that strict requirements placed on them don't mirror the quality of support provided. Appointments are often rescheduled or delayed, but there is strong emphasis on claimants' punctuality. Similarly, whilst claimants must show they're meeting their commitments, they don't feel supported to do so. Such lack of mutuality creates a barrier to honest and constructive relationships.

Claimants we interviewed had a very wide range of experiences. Despite many positive examples we came across during interviews, it is clear that some work coaches still have quite negative attitudes. Throughout this research, we came across some examples of direct hostility towards claimants and indifference to their complex needs.

The service design of Jobcentres itself can be a barrier to engagement. People viewed security staff as intimidating, and the lack of privacy uncomfortable. There were also communication issues, including problems with using the UC journal and accessing notifications. Claimants also struggled to build relationships with their work coaches when they weren't able to see the same person each time. Many reported inconsistent information from different work coaches.

Finally, Jobcentre support is overshadowed by benefit sanctions. The threat of reduced income undermines trust in work coaches and skews the power dynamic between them and claimants. Strict conditionality also makes claimants

feel that they are not believed, which further damages the relationship. It prevents claimants from being open, as they feel any sign of doubt or disagreement with their work coaches could be used against them. For these reasons, continuing with conditionality in its current form risks eroding the positive aspects of reform outlined in the Get Britain Working white paper.

There is a need for the careful balancing of work coach discretion and safeguarding claimants from insensitive or arbitrary treatment. Work coaches should be empowered to provide a flexible, personalised service. However, steps need to be taken to reduce unease, fear and scepticism felt by claimants. Improved safeguarding should primarily involve improving training for work coaches and greater management oversight. It is also important that the complaints process is made transparent and accessible for claimants.

Steps in the right direction have already been proposed. The white paper indicates a move from a punitive system to one based on tailored, in-depth support. It is vital that these reforms are carried out with an emphasis on building more positive and trusting relationships between work coaches and claimants.

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