

# FIRST WAVE FINDINGS: Overview

May 2016

The scope and depth of sanctions and mandatory support within the welfare system has progressed significantly in recent years. Currently this system of intensified, personalised and extended ‘welfare conditionality’ is increasing again, with further requirements on welfare users – including some of those in work.

This overview summarises key first wave findings on the effects and ethics of welfare conditionality. It draws on data from interviews with 52 policy stakeholders (PS), 27 focus groups (FG) conducted with practitioners and 480 ‘wave a’ qualitative longitudinal interviews with nine groups of welfare service users (WSUs) in England and Scotland. These WSUs are: jobseekers, Universal Credit (UC) claimants, disabled people, migrants, lone parents, offenders, social tenants, homeless people, and those subject to anti-social behaviour (ASB) interventions and Family Intervention Projects (FIPs). Welfare service users will be interviewed three times in total and the research will be completed in 2018.



## Key findings

- Most respondents report negative experiences of conditional welfare interventions. Linking continued receipt of benefit and services to mandatory behavioural requirements under threat of sanction created widespread anxiety and feelings of disempowerment among WSUs.
- The impacts of benefit sanctions are universally reported by welfare service users as profoundly negative. Routinely, sanctions had severely detrimental financial, material, emotional and health impacts on those subject to them. There was evidence of certain individuals disengaging from services or being pushed toward ‘survival crime’.
- Harsh, disproportionate or inappropriate sanctioning created deep resentment and feelings of injustice among WSUs.
- Some social tenants with fixed-term, conditional forms of tenancy were unaware or unconcerned about this, but it was a cause of considerable anxiety for some, especially those with a disability or health problems and for families with children.
- Most WSUs reported negative experiences of support from Jobcentre Plus or the Work Programme. However, there were some examples of good practice, and of mandatory support helping people to improve their work or personal situations.
- There is limited evidence to date of welfare conditionality bringing about positive behaviour change. Evidence of it working to move people nearer to the paid labour market was rare. A minority of practitioners and WSUs did acknowledge some positive outcomes.

- The common thread linking stories of successful transitions into work, or the cessation of problematic behaviour, was not so much the threat or experience of sanction, but the availability of appropriate individual support.
- Poor communication meant some respondents did not understand the reasons for sanction, or the engagement with mandatory support and behavioural requirements placed on them.
- Many WSUs are broadly supportive of welfare rights being linked to specified responsibilities. They are, however, more critical of how welfare conditionality is being implemented.

## Experiences of welfare conditionality

Most respondents report negative experiences of the system of welfare conditionality.

Linking continued receipt of benefit and services to mandatory behavioural requirements such as engagement with support created widespread anxiety and feelings of disempowerment among WSUs. Many experienced compulsory conditions including non-negotiable support, fixed-term tenancies (FTTs), and other behavioural requirements as disempowering, because of the compulsory character of specified conditions and/or the practical ways they were applied and enforced. For many, the struggle to meet the requirements placed on them and coping with the secondary effects triggered by potential non-compliance negated the opportunities for achieving positive behaviour change. The application of welfare conditionality to those with caring responsibilities, ill health, disability, addiction or language difficulties was especially problematic.

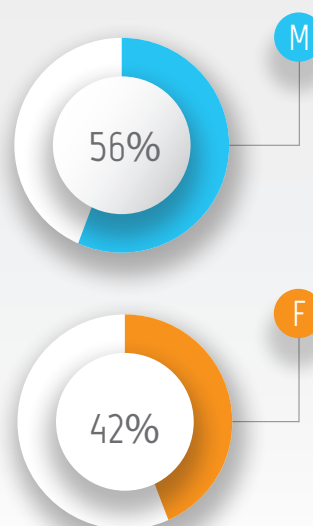
However, some service users and support professionals did have positive experiences or views of conditionality. Some professionals saw enforcement coupled with support as a catalyst for change.

## The impacts of sanctions

The impacts of benefit sanctions are universally

- TOTAL WSUs / 480 -

-GENDER-



reported by welfare service users as profoundly negative.

Many respondents were already experiencing multiple forms of vulnerability and marginalisation, manifested in mental health issues, homelessness, domestic violence, challenges of parenting and difficult home environments. Multiple barriers to employment were widespread.

Routinely, sanctions had severely detrimental financial, material, emotional and health impacts on those subject to them. There was evidence of benefit sanctions promoting extreme outcomes in some cases, with certain individuals disengaging from services or being pushed toward 'survival crime'.

## Widely reported negative impacts

Increased borrowing and debt was a common outcome and a strongly recurrent theme across our 480 service user interviews. Some people ended up near-destitute, using food banks. Some had multiple arrears (utility, rent) and experienced eviction threats. Children were also affected.

*“ Eventually they gave me £4 at the Jobcentre because I just went up and said ‘Why did you sanction me? I’ve no food. I’ve no electric and I would like to claim an emergency payment’, but it’s in town which is a two hour walk with no food, no sustenance and I’m a diabetic. Oh wow that was a horrible day... I was fuming that this had been done to me. ”*

*(WSU, JSA recipient, male, England)*

*“ So, I can’t afford to eat at the moment... So, he [my son] has that, like he’ll eat my food, I don’t care. He even says, ‘Why aren’t you eating?’ ‘I ate earlier.’ ”*

*(WSU, lone parent, female, England)*

*“ [The hospital] were saying, ‘You’ve lost weight.’ I said, ‘Well I can’t eat. I’ve got no food, I’ve got no money.’ ”*

*(WSU, disabled man, England)*

*“ My daughter could not attend school for two weeks. I didn’t have any money for that; you have to give her some money every day for some lunch and for a bus. ”*

*(WSU, migrant, male, Scotland)*

Some individuals who had been sanctioned and left with no income reported turning to crime to survive.

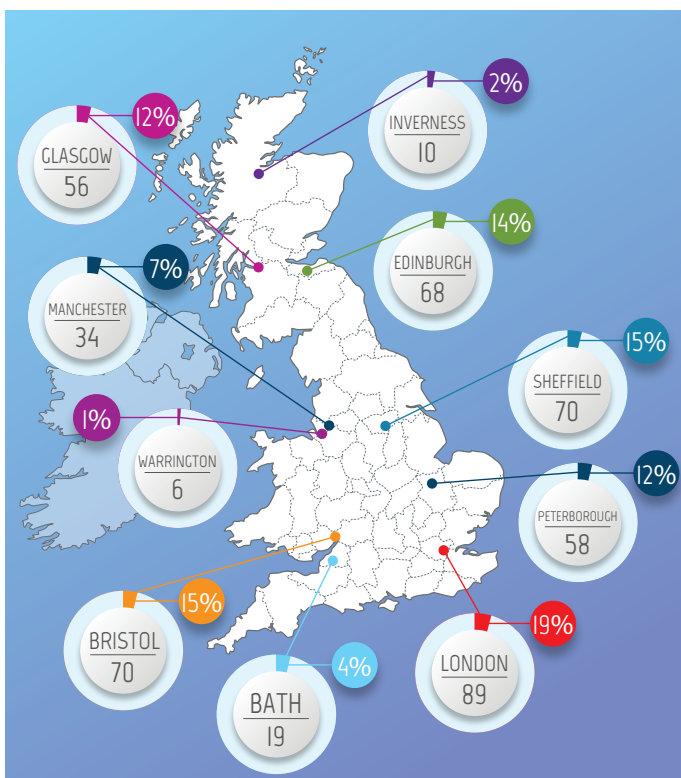
*“ I got a sanction for not going to an interview. I got sanctioned for a month... It made me shoplift to tell you the truth. I couldn’t survive with no money. I was homeless... So if I needed something I’d have to ‘borrow it’ from [supermarket] or something. ”*

*(WSU, homeless man, England)*

*“ I just gave it up [the benefit claim] and didn’t bother with it again. Carried on just going out every day thieving. ”*

*(WSU, offender, male, England)*

## -LOCATION-



## Inappropriate sanctions

A recurring theme in recipients’ experiences was that sanctions or other enforcement measures were out of proportion to the ‘offence’, such as being a few minutes late for an appointment. Many reported being sanctioned following administrative mistakes by Jobcentre or Work Programme staff. The Claimant Commitment was criticised for not taking sufficient account of individuals’ capabilities, wider responsibilities and/or vulnerabilities.

Harsh, disproportionate or inappropriate sanctions created deep resentment and a sense of injustice, as well as causing severe hardship.

## Conditionality in social housing

In the social housing group, some tenants with fixed-term, conditional forms of tenancy were

unaware or unconcerned about this. But it was a cause of considerable anxiety for some, especially those with a disability or health problems and for families with children. Some tenants were affected by both the 'bedroom tax' and FTTs.

*“ Not that we actually wanted to move but we felt as though we were slightly*

*pushed... by the bedroom tax yes... for 17 years we were secure tenants... and suddenly we're a five-year contract... I don't think it's fair at all... my husband is living on his nerves now thinking, what's going to happen at the end? ”*

*(WSU, social tenant, female, England)*

## Experiences of support

Most WSUs reported negative experiences of support into work from Jobcentre or Work Programme staff. Many saw Jobcentre Plus in particular as being primarily concerned with monitoring behavioural requirements, discipline and enforcement.

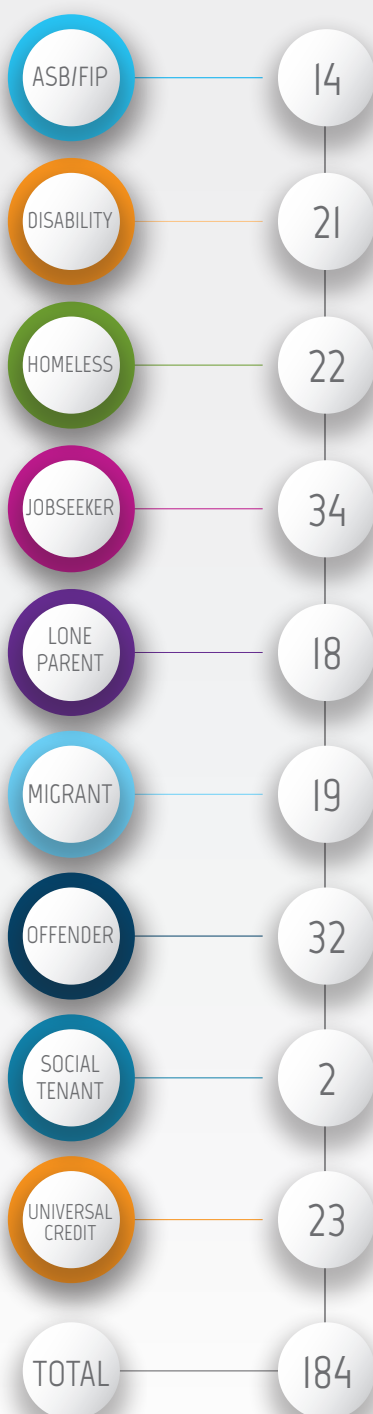
Among offenders there was widespread exasperation at the limited types of support on offer. Job search support was not valued either as a means of finding work or, more importantly, improving long-term labour market prospects. Although 'day one' mandation of offenders to the Work Programme is a key policy innovation, satisfaction and engagement with the support was low. Many offenders expressed a need for vocational training so that they could 'learn a trade'.

European Economic Area (EEA) migrants spoke of being denied support due to additional residency and 'genuine prospect of work' requirements. Practitioners and policy stakeholders working with refugees and asylum seekers emphasised concerns about highly qualified migrants being 'forced into low-paid, low-skilled jobs' rather than supported to make use of their pre-existing skills.

Respondents reported variable quality of and satisfaction with support. Some disabled respondents spoke of being treated like 'a number' and felt that the 'one-size fits all' approach to supporting disabled people into work was inappropriate.

Many UC recipients reported a 'tick box' approach to support, which could create a dynamic between Jobcentre Plus advisers and claimants that some interviewees experienced as intimidating,

### -EXPERIENCE OF BENEFIT SANCTIONS-



dehumanising and disempowering. Many offenders had a confrontational relationship with front-line staff who were deemed too quick to levy benefit sanctions without exploring the reasons for individuals failing to attend appointments.

However, there were some examples of good practice and of mandatory support helping people to improve their work or personal situations. These included empathetic Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme advisers, some of whom were supportive and flexible in their response to individuals' circumstances, and whose support was appreciated:

---

*“ I really like my adviser. She’s great... she’s a really caring helpful person in general I find. It’s not always been like that in there, but she is really lovely... It’s been quite positive yes. It’s fine yes. ”*

*(WSU, UC recipient, female, England)*

---

Some disabled respondents also described more positive experiences and several said that once staff properly appreciated their situation, appropriate support and advice had been offered in a sensitive manner.

---

*“ She was lovely, very nice. She told me about all the training options... she understood exactly what I wanted... She gave me choices. ”*

*(WSU, disabled woman, England)*

---

There was a stark contrast between complex and personalised packages of intervention relating to ASB/FIPs and the more ‘automated’ benefit sanctions regime.

---

*“ I didn’t have to. That was voluntary; that was my choice. It was there, and I thought, well, you know what, if it’s there I’m going to take it. It was very welcomed. ”*

*(WSU, ASB, female, England)*

---



---

*“ They work so hard. They want to bring families together and try to understand each other, you know? They’re a good thing. ”*

*(WSU, ASB, male, England)*

---

There was scepticism among some professionals about whether individuals could be forced to take up support services.

---

*“ We offer buckets of support and we’ve got intensive support, we’ve got ordinary support, we’ve every version known to man, but unless they attend appointments, sign up to it, you can’t make it [happen]. How do you enforce a positive behaviour order? ”*

*(FG2, anti-social behaviour, Scotland)*

---

## Behaviour change

---

At the heart of welfare conditionality is a belief that it will change service users' behaviour. Our research to date in this first wave of findings has found limited evidence of welfare conditionality bringing about positive behaviour change in terms of preparing for or finding paid work and/or ending irresponsible behaviour.

Many welfare service users challenged the notion that they did not want to work. Virtually all interviewees expressed a desire to work in the future when, and if, their personal situations made this possible.

---

*“ If I get into employment, it’s about being a good example for my kids. It’s positive. Hopefully more money coming in the house, healthier food you can put on the table, and better clothing. Definitely I think employment is the way to go. ”*

*(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)*

---

Some respondents did initially become superficially compliant with directives from

frontline staff. In addition, sanctions sometimes triggered a change to benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance where lower levels of conditionality apply.

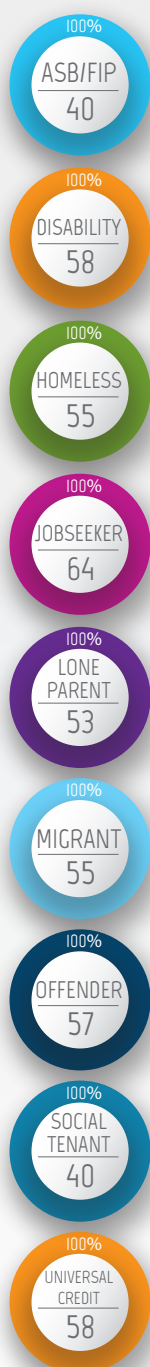
Applying behavioural conditionality appeared to push some people away from available support, sometimes with grave consequences,

including having little to eat and worsening health problems. Sanctions could undermine the process of recovery from addiction or mental or physical health problems:

*“ They might be on a recovery path and that sanction could probably put them back down, back to square one again, or further back. ”*

*(WSU, offender, female, England)*

- PRIMARY SAMPLING CHARACTERISTIC OF WSUs -



Some respondents reported mandatory work search requirements as counterproductive to their entry into paid work. In this context, the online jobsearch tool Universal Job Match was particularly criticised as ineffective, a distraction from more effective job search methods, and a tool of surveillance.

Application of conditionality to in-work UC claimants was criticised as particularly inappropriate. This group were subject to similar requirements and surveillance to those out of work, on the assumption that they need to be cajoled into active job search. This assumption does not fit the lived experience of in-work claimants, who already provide evidence of their willingness to work by being in paid employment. The potential of fixed-term tenancies in social housing to encourage better tenant conduct was also questioned. Some landlords were sceptical about positive outcomes.

## Towards paid employment

Evidence of conditionality working to move people nearer to paid work was rare but not entirely absent.

One disabled respondent with multiple needs spoke positively about her participation on the Work Programme, once she had become reconciled that engagement may be in her best interests. She has recently been offered a job in retail.

Some practitioners working with the ASB, homelessness and offender groups did regard enforcement coupled with support as a potential

catalyst for positive behaviour change. Those homelessness professionals advocating intervention or conditional support asserted that it would be irresponsible to knowingly allow people to continue to behave in ways that are harmful.

*“Essentially [if allowing a street drinker to continue drinking in public places] we’d be complicit in allowing, potentially, people that we’re meant to have some responsibility for to continue to engage in a behaviour that they may not actually be able to control. I mean that’s addiction isn’t it? Loss of control. To the point of death. So you need to find a balance.”*

*(FG24, Homelessness, England)*

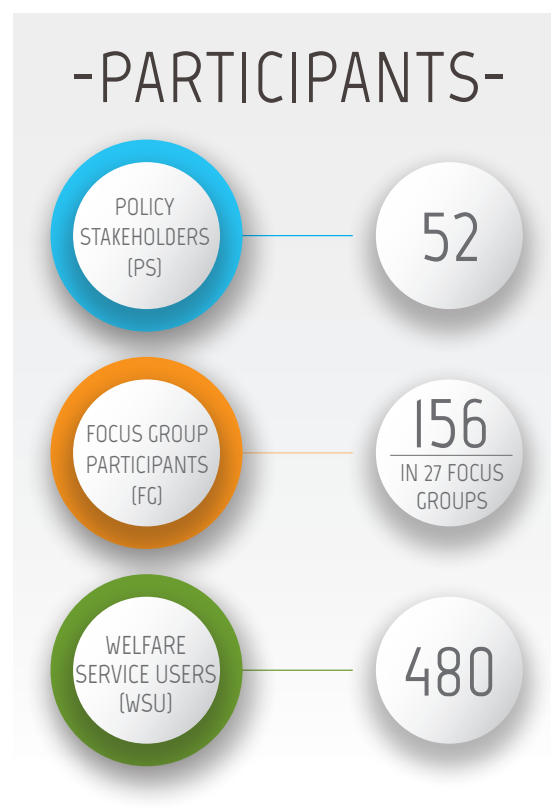
Supporters of conditional welfare systems argue that the threat of sanction is a necessary trigger to compel the engagement that leads to long term behaviour change. However, the evidence suggests that the common thread linking stories of successful transitions into work or the cessation of problematic behaviour was not so much the threat or experience of sanction, but the availability of appropriate individual support.

*“[Support organisation] are pukka, everything, paperwork, like support if I’ve got problems... When I used to feel really low, I used to hit the bottle. Now... I’ll just ring [support worker] up and he’ll say, ‘Right do you want to come to speak to someone?’ Which is great, that’s all I need... I’ve never felt more confident. Now I’ve got my head screwed back on. I’ve got a job interview for [company]... through these guys... fingers crossed, I’ll be off benefits and back on proper money. Yes, that’s all I want.”*

*(WSU, offender, male, England)*

## The logic of conditionality

Vulnerabilities of the kinds found in our study brought into question key premises upon which



conditional welfare interventions are based. Advocates of welfare conditionality take the view that people are able to make decisions and respond to both sanctions and support in rational and future-orientated ways. But some interviewees reported that they did not know or did not understand why they had been sanctioned. In such cases the rationale underpinning welfare conditionality, that its application will bring about positive behaviour change, is fundamentally undermined.

## The ethics of conditionality

Many welfare service users are broadly supportive of welfare rights being linked to specified responsibilities. They are, however, much more critical of how welfare conditionality is being implemented.

Welfare service users commonly stated that people’s individual circumstances needed to be taken to account. Applying behavioural requirements to those who were incapable of work, because of impairment and/or sole caring responsibilities for children, was often seen as inappropriate and unjustifiable.

Disabled claimants viewed the Work Capability Assessment as not fit-for-purpose and strongly stated that work-related requirements must take adequate account of an individual's impairments and capacity to work. Lone parents felt that more account should be taken of their care-giving responsibilities (and indeed existing flexibilities were not always used by Jobcentre staff).

---

*“ My daughter was ill, she was very sick that morning... I tried to obtain medical help of what to do in such a situation... By the time it was over I tried to call it was too late, my advisor wasn't there. They said I'm late and they're going to sanction me. ”*  
*(WSU, lone parent, female, England)*

---

Some respondents looked to endorse the legitimacy of their own claim to welfare by undermining the claims of others. Other groups could be portrayed as 'scroungers' or people whose situation was a result of their own irresponsible behaviour.

Broad support for conditionality did not necessarily extend to an uncritical acceptance of the current benefit sanctions regime. Some service users wanted a warning system before sanctions were imposed. Many raised the issue of proportionality: for example, some favoured

retaining access to a minimal level of basic, unconditional benefit to ensure that those subject to sanctions were not left destitute. Some accepted the idea of a loss of income as a penalty, but not the loss of a home.

Practitioners in the study were more divided on the appropriateness of conditionality. Some, particularly a number of those involved in criminal justice, dealing with anti-social behaviour or homelessness support, saw enforcement and support as complementary and part of their range of resources. Others rejected enforcement for practical reasons – believing that it was ineffectual or could push people further away from support. Regardless of any support in principle for welfare conditionality, most welfare service users found that the practice they had experienced was negative and even often counterproductive.

## Authors

This overview, which draws on evidence from across the project to date, was written by Professor Peter Dwyer and Dr Janis Bright, University of York.

It summarises key points from the research team's detailed findings on our nine study areas. The detailed findings papers can be found at <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications/>.

---

Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change is a major five-year programme of research funded under the Economic and Social Research Council's Centres and Large Grants Scheme. The project aims to create an international and interdisciplinary focal point for social science research on welfare conditionality and brings together teams of researchers working in six English and Scottish Universities.

