

FIRST WAVE FINDINGS:

Overview:

Social security in Scotland

June 2016

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, with detrimental financial, material, emotional and health impacts highlighted.
- Harsh, disproportionate or inappropriate sanctioning created deep resentment and feelings of injustice among WSUs.
- 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 situations.
- There was limited evidence to date of welfare conditionality bringing about positive behaviour change. A minority of practitioners and WSUs did acknowledge some positive outcomes. ASB interventions in Scotland were found to have a distinct approach that combines prevention and early intervention.
- 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.
- Some WSUs were broadly supportive of welfare rights being linked to specified responsibilities. Many were critical of welfare conditionality in principle and in practice.



The scope and depth of sanctions and mandatory support within the British welfare system has expanded and intensified in recent years, including to some in-work recipients. The Scotland Act 2016 transferred greater powers to the Scottish Parliament for employment programmes (for disabled people and those at risk of long-term unemployment); tribunals; and certain social security benefits (including creating new benefits in devolved areas such as health, education or law, short-term discretionary payments and top-ups to reserved benefits) [1]. Although conditionality, including sanctions, remains under Westminster control, there is scope to develop Scottish responses to the issues raised by our findings.

This overview summarises key first wave findings on the effects and ethics of welfare conditionality in Scotland. It draws on interviews with 31 policy stakeholders (PS), seven focus groups (FG) conducted with practitioners and 134 'wave a' qualitative longitudinal interviews with welfare service users (WSU) in Scotland [2]. The seven groups of WSUs included in this overview are: jobseekers, Universal Credit claimants, disabled people, migrants, lone parents, offenders 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.

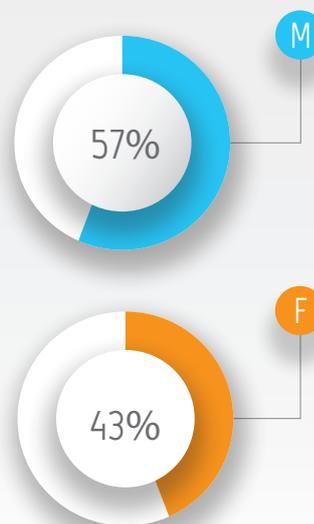
Experiences of welfare conditionality

Most respondents report negative experiences 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 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

- TOTAL WSUs / 134 -

-GENDER-



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 reported by welfare service users as profoundly negative.

Many respondents were already experiencing multiple forms of vulnerability and marginalisation, manifested in mental health issues, 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 134 service user interviews in Scotland. Some people ended up near-destitute, using food banks. Some had multiple arrears (utility, rent) and experienced eviction threats. Children were also affected.

“ Scraping by, friends, family. You know, tapping money, and then you end up in more debt. Then when your next cheque comes out you’re like, God, £84, or £86, whatever it is, and you’re immediately gone twenty, thirty quid out to family and friends you’ve tapped, and you’re even worse off. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance, male, Scotland)

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

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

“ Well, it put me in debt! So, it depressed me. I never ate so many beans and pasta in my life... that’s when I went £500 in arrears with my rent. ”

(WSU, disabled man, Scotland)

“ 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’d go into shops and steal whatever just to make do basically. And I used to rig my meter when I had my house. ”

(WSU, offender, female, Scotland).

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 Plus 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.

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.

“ I mean I was seeing this guy [name]. As a person I got on with him quite well. As an adviser I thought he was bloody useless. ”

(WSU, disabled man, Scotland).

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’.

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. A strong and recurrent theme within the Scottish sample of disabled WSUs was the need for a genuinely personalised approach to the provision of appropriate support to enable people into work.

“ I don’t really think it’s done my self-confidence much good... [they need to] address the needs of the individual much more thoroughly. It’s very much one package fits all... Individual circumstances don’t seem to be taken into account. ”
 (WSU, disabled man, Scotland)

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, 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’m perfectly happy with the Jobcentre... I’ve never seen anyone being told, ‘No, I’m too busy’, which is always nice to see. Yes, they’ve got a lot of good support in there

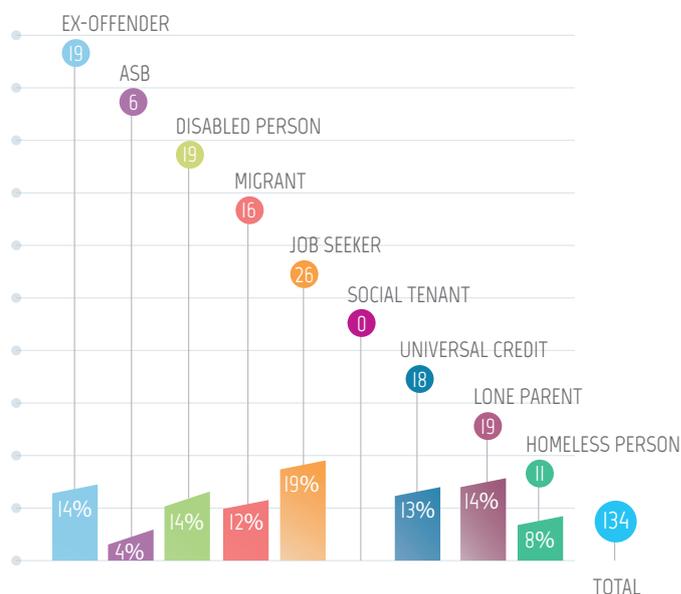
for people who need it, I can’t sing their praises high enough. ”
 (WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

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.

“ I heard about disability employment advisers [DEAs], and that was my lifeline... there should be more DEA officers... since more people with disabilities are being forced to find work. ”
 (WSU, disabled woman, Scotland)

“ I’ve always had a very good relationship with the Jobcentre...The disability employment adviser... she’s brilliant... she always pushes the screen so that I can see it as she types, so I’ve seen all my records... On it, it says that I really do try, that I’m not someone who is shirking, I’m doing my best. ”
 (WSU, disabled woman, Scotland)

-PRIMARY SAMPLING CHARACTERISTIC OF WSUs-



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

“ We get there with 90 percent of the cases, so to suggest that we need to put something else in, like links to sanction somebody’s benefit, is wrong. ”

(FG17, Anti-social behaviour, Scotland)

The distinct legal and policy framework in Scotland affects the ways that ASB interventions, and forms of conditionality within them, are

conceptualised and operationalised. These include the Promoting Positive Outcomes Framework and the legacy of the Breaking the Cycle projects and an emphasis on prevention, early intervention and support. Practitioners in our study also pointed to a different interpretation of the existing evidence, meaning that in Scotland there is little support for the idea that new mechanisms of sanction, or support, are actually required.

“ I think the [ASB] strategy wanting positive outcomes was very much about ... promoting positive outcomes and that emphasis away from the kind of [punitive] approach... That would still be our approach which pre-dates slightly the outcome focus approach that Scottish Government has adopted, but very much chimed with it and again predated... the asset based approaches that are now being talked about much more commonly. ”

(FG17, Anti-social behaviour, Scotland)

“ There isn’t a local authority in Scotland who doesn’t take supporting measures along with enforcement measures, not a single one, and it’s been a long, long time since the whole scores on the doors approach and how many ASBOs have you got this year. ”

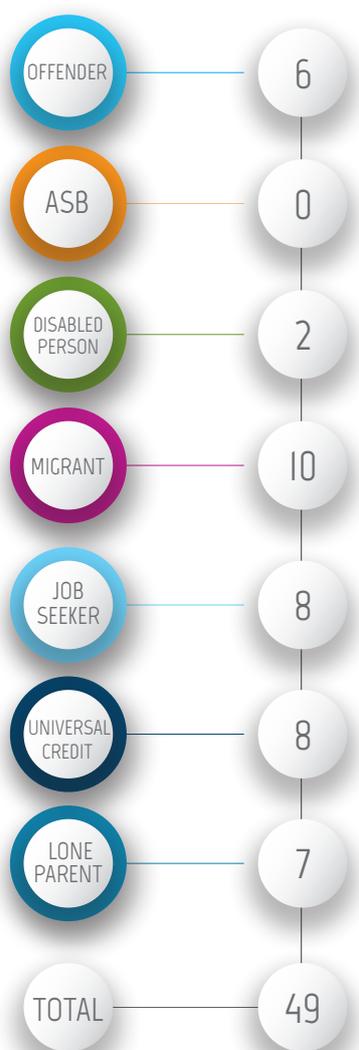
(FG17, Anti-social behaviour, Scotland)

There was, though, 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? ”

(FG17, Anti-social behaviour, Scotland)

-EXPERIENCE OF BENEFIT SANCTIONS BY SELECTED POLICY AREA-



Note: Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding. This overview excludes findings from social tenants and homeless people, which will be addressed in a separate paper.

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.

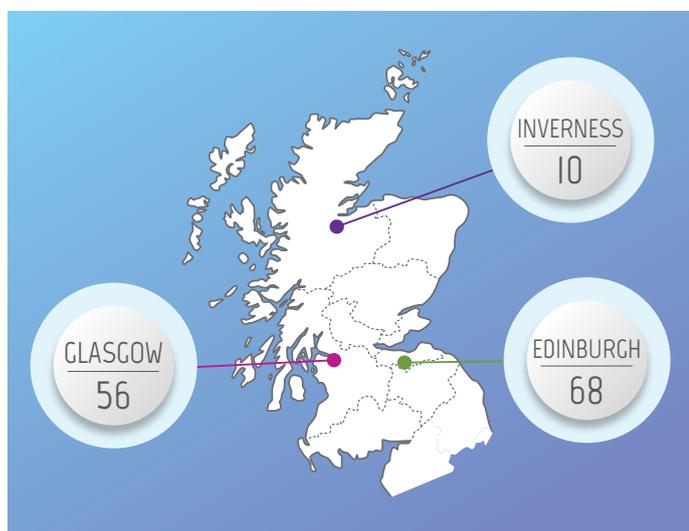
Many welfare service users challenged the notion that they did not want to work. Virtually all interviewees expressed a desire to work in the future when, and if, their personal situations made this possible.

“ 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. ”

(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.

-LOCATION-



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.

“ It is demeaning, condescending, it is painful, it is damaging, it actually makes your disabilities worse... And it is completely unproductive. It doesn't get people work. Nothing in what they've done to me has assisted me in getting back in to the employment market. So these people are paid to torture me basically, for money I don't get. ”

(WSU, disabled woman, Scotland)

Some respondents reported mandatory work search requirements as counterproductive to their entry into paid work. In this context, the online jobsearch tool Universal Jobmatch 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.

Towards paid employment

Evidence of conditionality working to move people nearer to paid work was rare but not entirely absent. Some practitioners working with the ASB and offender groups did regard enforcement coupled with support as a potential catalyst for positive behaviour change.

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 to date 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.

“ We have always argued that lone parents, and research shows, the majority do want to work when it’s in the best interests of their child. What they require is the support to be able to do that, resources to improve skills, education and support to move into work. ”

(PS31 Senior representative, lone parent charity)

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

Some welfare service users are broadly supportive of welfare rights being linked to specified responsibilities. Many in Scotland were critical of welfare conditionality in principle, as well as in practice.

“ I think sanctions are wrong. ”
(WSU, offender, male, Scotland).

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).

“ I found myself applying for jobs that I wasn’t going to get ... it’s just silly and it’s demeaning for me to actually do that, apply for jobs that I know I’m not going to get. That if I did get to the interview stage I would go to the interview and say, ‘Oh by the way, I can’t do this job because I can’t work round my children. ”

(WSU, lone parent, Scotland)

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 or dealing with anti-social behaviour 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.

Most welfare users in the study found that regardless of any potential positives in principle of welfare conditionality, 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, and Dr Sharon Wright, University of Glasgow, with contributions from Dr Alasdair B R Stewart, University of Glasgow, Prof Del Roy Fletcher, Sheffield Hallam University, Prof John Flint, University of Sheffield, and Prof Sarah Johnsen, Heriot Watt University.

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

Footnotes

1. The Scottish Parliament (2016) Citizens' Guide to Scottish Devolution, Edinburgh: Devolution (Further Powers) Committee; Spicker, P. (2016) New benefit powers for Scotland, Poverty Alliance Briefing 24, Glasgow: The Poverty Alliance.
2. These are the full numbers of our interviewees in Scotland. However, this overview excludes findings from social tenants and homeless people, which will be addressed in a separate paper.

-KEY-

PS refers to policy stakeholder
 FG refers to focus group
 WSU refers to welfare service user

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.

