
Working Paper

Lived experiences of mental health problems and welfare conditionality

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Abstract

This paper explores experiences and impacts of welfare conditionality among people with mental health problems in the UK. Understanding of these experiences and impacts is crucial given the UK Government's ambition to increase the number of people with mental health problems who enter, return or stay in employment. The paper is based on a secondary analysis of 144 interviews originally conducted as part of the *Welfare Conditionality* project running between 2013 and 2018. Overall, it establishes that welfare conditionality does not have a positive impact on behavioural change and return to employment for people with mental health problems. Furthermore, it shows that those categorised as unfit for work are excluded from back-to-work support. Finally, it demonstrates that mental health is invalidated within the welfare system, and the pressure and poverty arising from conditionality and sanctions are likely to exacerbate mental health problems.

Keywords: welfare conditionality, mental health, welfare reform, social security benefits, benefit sanctions

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1 Introduction

With the evidence that work can be good for mental health, the UK Government in their Mental Health Strategy set an ambition to increase the number of people with mental health problems who enter, return or stay in employment (Department of Health 2011). Concurrent with this policy goal has been successive waves of welfare reform, largely seen as marking a punitive turn by critics (Dwyer 2018a; Redman 2019; Wiggan 2012). Increasing the knowledge-base on the experience of welfare conditionality amongst people with mental health problems is, therefore, crucial.

This is a working paper for the Work Package 3: *Qualitative Analysis of Policy and Lived Experience* of the Health Foundation funded project *Causal effects of alcohol and mental health problems on employment outcomes* (2018-2020). It is based on a secondary analysis of interview data from the earlier *Welfare Conditionality* (2013-2018) project funded by the Economic and Research Council. The paper presents key findings on the experiences and impacts of welfare conditionality for claimants with mental health problems and further develops the primary analysis undertaken as part of the *Welfare Conditionality* project (published as Dwyer et al. 2019). These findings draw directly on the experiences of 144 participants (from an overall sample of 381) who were interviewed within three waves of repeat interviews, undertaken between 2014 and 2017, for the *Welfare Conditionality* project. The sample includes any participants from the project who spoke about experiencing mental health problems and was either receiving a conditional benefit or was in employment at the time of any of their interviews.

The next section provides a short policy context outlining the main policy changes to out of work benefits in the UK. Following this is an overview of the sample and the procedure followed for the secondary analysis. The findings sections are then presented, focusing on four principal areas: first, how participants experienced the Work Capability Assessment that is used to determine eligibility for Employment and Support Allowance; second, the experience of welfare conditionality, including mandatory support and relationships with Work Coaches; third, the impact of sanctions and welfare conditionality; and fourth, how the experience and impact of welfare conditionality influenced the return to employment journey. Finally, key findings are drawn together in the conclusion.

2 Policy Context

The potential benefits of work for mental health has become a key tenant across UK health, welfare, and employment policy (Department of Health 2010, 2011; Department for Work and Pensions 2013). Policy proposals have set out an ambition to increase how many people with mental health problems enter, remain in, or return to employment. The move to emphasising the health benefits of work has operated alongside a broader policy of welfare reform, carried out over two decades by successive UK governments. These reforms have sought to reduce so-called “welfare dependency” through intensifying welfare conditionality, which ties continuing welfare entitlement to mandatory behavioural requirements. Proponents of welfare conditionality argue that welfare itself acts as a barrier to employment, by discouraging willingness to work (Mead and Beem 2005). Furthermore, the DWP has argued that prolonged periods claiming benefits is corrosive to mental health (Department for Work and Pensions 2013).

Welfare conditionality aims to “correct” claimants’ behaviour and increase motivation to find employment (Watts and Fitzpatrick 2018). In the UK, benefits have always had conditions attached to them. The introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) though marked a shift towards greater job search expectations being placed upon claimants. Similarly, the introduction of Universal Credit (UC), which will eventually replace the main out of work based benefits, brought with it increased expectations and a tougher sanctions regime. In receipt for their benefits, claimants must now keep a record of job search activity, regularly attend Jobcentre Plus appointments, and engage with any mandatory courses or Work Programme placements they are referred to. Failure to meet these conditions come with the threat of receiving a sanction, where benefit payments were originally halted for 4 weeks to 3 years depending on the severity of the transgression (Department for Work and Pensions 2010). However, in acknowledgement of criticisms that prolonged sanctions are counterproductive to increasing employment, the UK Government (2019) announced in May 2019 that the maximum sanction period was recently reduced to six months.

Given the harshness of sanctions, critics have argued welfare reform in seeking to radically restructure the relationship between citizens and the state forms part of a larger programme of neo-liberal state-crafting. Sanctions-backed conditionality, in particular, is highlighted as an example of a punitive turn in welfare policy that pushes claimants into precarious and low-paid employment, undermining the decommodification and social security provided by the welfare state (Adler 2016; Barker and Lambie 2009; Fletcher and Wright 2017; Jeffery, Devine and Thomas 2018). More recent welfare reforms have

merged with austerity policies, aiming to reduce the footfall at Jobcentre Plus offices and reducing staffing levels. Benefit “off flow” targets have been reported as part of an overall deterrence strategy (Fletcher and Wright 2017).

In 2007, welfare conditionality was extended to disabled people recognised as unable or having limited capacity to work through the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). When initially proposed by New Labour, they expressed strong concern at the high proportion of long-term incapacity benefit claimants whose primary disability was a mental health condition - a concern still expressed in more recent disability and welfare policy papers (Department for Work and Pensions 2006, 2013). ESA was presented as addressing the needs for a benefit and assessment process that accounted for the most prevalent mental health conditions amongst those on incapacity benefits.

The ESA Work Capability Assessment (WCA) takes place within the first few months of starting a new ESA claim and has primarily three possible outcomes. Those found “fit for work” are ineligible to continue receiving ESA and are directed to start a JSA or UC claim instead. If a person is found as having limited capacity to work, or could soon be ready to return to employment, they are placed in the Work-Related Activity Group. They are not expected to actively look for work, but are expected to attend regular back to work-focused interviews and engage in work-related activity such as mandatory courses and Work Programme placements. The Support Group is for claimants assessed as not able to return to employment and do not have to engage in any job search activity. Claimants in this group can voluntarily opt to engage in work-related activity and undertake permitted work, but with limits on number of hours and how much they can earn. Whilst Universal Credit will eventually replace ESA, these group divisions are retained.

Proponents of reforming disability benefits have argued that attitudinal and motivational barriers to employment are often greater than those posed by impairments (Department for Work and Pensions 2013; Mead 2011). Others, however, have raised concern that such reforms result in reducing entitlement to disability benefits (Garthwaite et al. 2014; Grover and Piggott 2015). This is reflected in the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). Although based on a biopsychosocial model of disability, and purporting a multi-disciplinary understanding of disability, critics have claimed that it takes a limited functionalist view of impairments and exaggerates claimants’ fitness for work (Shakespeare, Watson and Algaib 2017; Stewart 2016). More broadly, there have also been concerns at the assumptions in welfare and health policy that prioritise work as the key means to improve health and wellbeing as well as seeing unemployment as an individual rather than structural problem (Frayne 2019; Patrick 2012). Furthermore, in contrast to the claims for a new assessment to account for the higher proportion of people claiming incapacity benefits due to mental health, the assessment contains few questions related to mental health (Bauld et al. 2012; Grover and Piggott 2013; Maclean, Marks and Cowan 2017). There is also emerging evidence of the negative impact of welfare reform and welfare conditionality on mental health (Barr et al. 2016; Dwyer 2018b; Garthwaite 2014; Mattheys 2015).

In this working paper, we aim to describe the lived experiences of people with mental health problems who are in receipt of welfare benefits. In doing so, we look at the experiences of Work Capability Assessment (WCA), welfare conditionality and sanctions, and their impact on return-to-work. By understanding the lived experiences of this client group, it is hoped that future return-to-work initiatives are better tailored to meet the needs of this group.

3 Methods

This working paper presents the findings of a secondary analysis of interview data from the ESRC-funded *Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change*¹ large grant project (2013-2018).

The project involved six UK universities and was the first major study of welfare conditionality. It investigated the ethics and efficacy of welfare conditionality. The core component of the research was repeat qualitative longitudinal interviews with 481 welfare service users across the UK. There were three waves of interviews with participants, giving a total of 1082 interviews. Full details about the project and an overview of the main findings are available in the Final Findings paper (Dwyer 2018b).

The project collected attribute data from participants at each interview. This included details of any mental health problems, benefits participants were receiving, and employment status. Using this attribute data, participants were selected for the secondary analysis if they:

- Discussed mental health problems at any interview wave.
- Were receiving a benefit with work search conditionality (ESA-WRAG, JSA, and UC) or were in employment at any interview wave.

A total of 144 participants matched these criteria, with 124 and 104 of them having taken part in a second and third interview respectively, providing 372 interviews in total. All analysis was performed using qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12. For the *Welfare Conditionality* project all interviews were thematically coded at multiple levels and summarised within a framework matrix. Further thematic coding was performed as part of the secondary analysis.

The majority of the 144 participants (i.e. over two thirds) suffered from **depression** at the time of fieldwork. One fourth reported **anxiety disorder**. There were also cases of **bipolar disorder** (5%), **post-traumatic stress disorder** (4%), **schizophrenia** (3-4%) and **borderline personality disorder** (2-3%). Where participants did not disclose the type of their condition, it was categorised as “other”. Likewise, conditions described as emotional problems, nervousness, panic attacks or hearing voices were categorised as “other” when not associated with a specific diagnose. This accounted for 16%

¹Funded by ESRC grant ES/K002163/2. Further details about the *Welfare Conditionality* project, including the final findings papers, can be found at welfareconditionality.ac.uk.

of participants. Additionally, over one eighth reported alcohol misuse and around one tenth – drug addiction.

It is important to note that many participants suffered from more than one mental disorder at the same time. Depression in particular frequently coincided with other conditions. There was also a high level of comorbidity between mental and physical, sensory or other form of disability (82 participants, i.e. over a half).

Table 3.1 below shows the number and percentage of participants at each wave receiving the three main conditional working-age benefits (JSA, UC, and ESA-WRAG) or were in the non-conditional ESA Support Group. There were also a few participants at each wave who had recently started an ESA claim and were waiting for their medical assessment to assign them to the WRAG or Support Group.

Table 3.1: Participant benefit status by interview wave

Status	Wave A	Wave B	Wave C
JSA	48 (33%)	16 (13%)	21 (20%)
UC	12 (17%)	13 (17%)	10 (15%)
ESA-WRAG	23 (16%)	24 (20%)	13 (13%)
ESA Support	14 (10%)	26 (21%)	24 (23%)

4 The Work Capability Assessment

The Work Capability Assessment (WCA) determines whether Employment and Support Allowance claimants will be placed in the Work-Related Activity Group, the Support Group, or have their ESA ended and have to make a JSA or UC claim instead. The WCA uses a points-based system (from 0 to 15) to evaluate individual ability to perform various activities, with 0 indicating that the activity can be performed in full. The outcomes of the assessment can be the following: fit for work, unfit for work but fit for work-related activities (e.g. job search assistance, work taster placement), and unfit for work and work-related activities. This section details participants profoundly negative experience of the WCA as intimidating and anxiety inducing, the lack of space to discuss mental health from the overall physical focus of the WCA, and how a substantial minority, including those with multiple comorbidities, were found “fit to work” following their assessment.

4.1 Negative experience

The Work Capability Assessment (WCA) received strong criticism from participants. It was widely viewed as a cruel and compassionless process, that was implemented to prevent people from accessing disability and sickness benefits and find as many “fit for work” as possible. Participants often felt that the system was casting doubt on their medical conditions and scrutinising them as potential “benefit cheats” and “scroungers”. As well as the stress and trepidation experienced by the process itself, a few reported it as detrimental to their wellbeing with a significant worsening of their disabilities in the days following the assessment.

“[The medical assessment] is demeaning, condescending, it is painful, it is damaging, it actually makes your disability worse if you’ve got some disability. 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-GL-AS-022

Anxieties over the assessment started early into the process and were often reinforced by the face-to-face experience. The 55-page pre-assessment Capability for Work questionnaire was perceived as overly complex and intimidating. Most participants reported that they required support from

voluntary organisations to complete it. As part of the form claimants can also include evidence from GPs, community psychiatric nurses, and occupational therapists, amongst others, as well as results from medical tests and current prescription lists. There was a high rate of comorbidity among participants that meant gathering evidence from all the specialists they dealt with was stressful in itself. The nature of a person's mental health impairment also could make filling the form arduous.

"It's like a book. It took [my support worker] an hour and a half to fill out." **WSU-ED-AS-002**

"I was scared. I was scared and I didn't know what I'd have to do for it. Again, it wasn't explained to me very well. Like I say, with my drinking, going through the change, being female, and having my fits, I find paperwork and everything very difficult, and I'm not the brightest spark in the box, so it needs to be explained to me, and I just didn't know." **WSU-BR-AS-009a**

In describing their experience of the face-to-face assessments, participants frequently started by pointing out that the atmosphere of the assessment buildings and the attitude of the staff was intimidating. Participants felt that even on approaching the building that they were being scrutinised and judged. The buildings were rarely accessible for those with physical disabilities, which a few also felt was intentional to see how they responded. Many said the assessment was not an "interview" but an "interrogation", with questions designed to "try and trip you up" (WSU-GL-AS-035) and find ways to declare them fit to work.

"Yes, and it's really intimidating and very scary and I was very lucky that I had a support worker come along with me [...] The building is grey and it reminds me of where people used to have to go and sign on in the 80s [...] When I went to my last [assessment], I felt I was being treated like I didn't deserve to get - like I said, that I had to justify my existence and why I was getting it. [...] It's just that it's incredibly demeaning." **WSU-BR-JM-016b**

"It was quite stressful, it was uncomfortable." **WSU-BA-JM-013c**

4.2 Physical focus

The inappropriateness of the WCA for mental health conditions exacerbated anxiety and feelings of disempowerment. Participants reported that the predominant physical focus of the assessment left them with inadequate opportunity to discuss their mental health or the impact it had on their daily life. They commonly referred to the difficulty of finding the right words to express how their mental health impacts them. Particularly, when they were being assessed on how they presented and interacted with the assessor.

“[They ask you] silly little thing like [...] ‘Can you stand on your toes?’ [...] but they don’t take into account the emotional side. [...] It’s, you know, really difficult to explain, [...] but I want to die. Figure that one out. Just because I can look somebody in the eye, and just because I can speak clearly enough doesn’t mean to say that I’m not depressed and no upset.” **WSU-BR-AS-009**

“I don’t feel that I was given enough opportunity to voice what I needed to say. I maybe should’ve taken somebody there that knows my situation, knows me, that could’ve been somebody more vocal and put over the problems and what not I was having at the time.” **WSU-ED-SJ-018a**

There was also a contradiction for some that they felt their mental health condition limited their ability to express themselves fully in the interview, particularly when disclosing personal information to a stranger. However, if their health had been better on the assessment day although they would have felt more confident in explaining their situation, they also felt this would be taken as evidence of their fitness to work.

“So she was saying to me, ‘So do you go for your messages [grocery shopping] once a fortnight?’ and I just went, ‘mm-mm’ because I felt she was saying things to me just to make you give her a yes or no answer. Where if I’d have been myself that day [...] I would have probably spoken up more for myself. I would have probably said to her, ‘No I don’t go once a fortnight and when I do go somebody comes with me’ [...] but] she would have probably said as well if I’d have been chattier the other time” **WSU-GL-AS-020**

Participants were also concerned that assessors often lacked knowledge of specific conditions or had no training in psychology or psychiatry. Similarly, it was perceived as unjust that the assessor’s decision would overrule any recommendations from their GPs and other medical specialists who had spent much more time with them.

“You don’t know the person, you don’t feel comfortable. You know you’re being judged by someone who isn’t your GP especially when you’ve been with your GP for a lot of years and your GP knows who you are. Your psychological and your mental welfare and everything else. [...] They’re not walking in my shoes, they’re only seeing you for, what, half an hour, forty minutes? They have got the right to sit that and say yes or no whether you should receive benefits?” **WSU-GL-AS-032A**

4.3 Fit for Work

A substantial minority of participants were found “fit to work”, including cases where participants with multiple long-term physical and mental health impairments received zero points. Similarly, a few participants who were originally placed in the ESA support group or work related activity group

were found fit for work at a subsequent assessment though they felt there had not been significant improvement of their health. Participants felt that formal decisions were made on spurious grounds and down-played the impact their health conditions had on their capability to work.

“They decided because I can lift my arms up that I was able to work.” **WSU-BA-JM-002a**

“I went for a medical and I got zero points. When you get the medical thing back that tells you why they’ve not given you any points, basically it came down to because I can get myself up and ready in the morning, get washed, could cook simple dinners and could go shopping and could go on public transport. That’s why I was struck off, but I’m appealing that.” **WSU-GL-AS-020**

Across the overall *Welfare Conditionality* sample there was a high rate of successful appeals, matching available national statistics¹. However, in contrast to media presentations of welfare claimants, most participants were not well-informed about how the system worked and regularly were unsure how to proceed. Similarly, not all participants were aware of the high success rate of appeals, including for people who originally received zero points in their assessment, and did not think they would have much chance of success if they made an appeal.

“I did get quite tearful and I was quite, I don’t know, she could see that I wasn’t in a good place. I was nothing but truthful, I was truthful; I didn’t have to ham it because I don’t want to do that, but when they say you are fit for work, what can you do?” **WSU-BA-JM-013c**

“I think you have to have like 15 points or whatever it is, I’m not sure how it works to be honest with you. But I just thought with zero points, I thought I’m not even going to bother even trying to fight it because if I’ve not got any points at all I just felt like I didn’t have anything, you know what I mean?” **WSU-ED-BW-023**

There was also evidence of confusion about the appeal process and participants receiving the wrong advice. This included a participant who despite originally receiving ESA after a successful appeal did not appeal a later decision that they were fit for work as they were informed that they could only appeal once. Another decided against making an appeal after being told by the Jobcentre Plus that they could not receive benefits and make an appeal at the same time, whilst this had been possible for other participants. Those with mental health conditions who failed the WCA faced a difficult dilemma when re-routed to JSA, because entitlement is conditional on signing a “fit to work” declaration. This was a double bind that was detrimental to mental health, because accepting the declaration meant signing a statement saying they are fit and available for work, but rejecting it meant losing benefit entitlement and facing deep poverty or destitution.

¹(Dwyer et al. 2018: 5), available at: welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications/final-findings-welcond-project/

“I didn’t want to sign [the Claimant Commitment for Jobseeker’s]. I said, ‘Here, look, I don’t want to sign this. I’m physically all right to work but I’m mentally not’. I’m mentally not. I says, ‘I’m signing this under protest’. She said, ‘Well, if you don’t sign it, you don’t get any money’, and I said, ‘Well, this is like as if I’ve been contradictory coming off ESA [...] Because I’ve still got depression and anxiety and depression.’” **WSU-GL-AS-016**

Even where participants were successful in their assessment or at appeal, this was not always enough to provide a sense of security. Particularly in cases where they had been through multiple previous assessments where they had been found fit for work. Concern remained that they could always be found “fit to work” when called for another assessment in the future.

“My armour has never been able to be hung up. It’s been constantly polished. I’d love to have a set of rusty armour hanging in my wardrobe. [...] I feel my life isn’t like healing [I’ve] got all these battles to get stuff that I need.” **WSU-ED-AS-002c**

Most participants’ difficult experiences of the WCA reinforced the over-riding impression that it was designed to deter people from benefits that they felt they were entitled to.

5 Experiencing Conditionality

Welfare conditionality through its combination of support and conditionality is supposed to motivate and empower claimants towards finding employment (Department for Work and Pensions 2010, 2013). In contrast, this section details how participants reported that welfare conditionality was disempowering through the way job search expectations were set with little opportunity for negotiation, there was an overall lack of support with often no consideration given for mental health problems, and how rather than being supported towards employment they felt under intense pressure to constantly meet all expectations without failure.

5.1 Disempowerment

In justifying welfare reform successive UK Governments have drawn on a dichotomy between “passive” and “active” welfare systems (Sinfield 2001; Wright 2012, 2016). Reforms to disability benefits have been justified as necessary to empower claimants to actively seek employment. Participants, however, predominantly described their experiences of welfare conditionality as disempowering and unsupportive.

The Claimant Commitment, for example, is described by the DWP (2019) as an agreement drawn up in “conversation” between a Work Coach and a claimant, tailoring the responsibilities in the commitment around their capability for job search and the impact of any health conditions and caring responsibilities. However, participants did not feel they were given opportunity to discuss the commitments they were asked to sign, with the choice limited to whether they signed it or lost their benefit entitlement.

“[The Claimant Commitment] didn’t benefit me. It put me under pressure that I couldn’t deal with. [...] Like I said the advisors were speaking to you, they had no idea what your health was before your first initial interview. So they’re just speaking to you like you’re every day Joe Bloggs, and you’ve got to do that. And that’s it. It’s not about why you ended up in this position or how’s your health kept you just now. You know?” **WSU-IN-AS-005**

There was a strong awareness amongst participants that they could be sanctioned if they failed to meet any of the responsibilities in their Claimant Commitment. This led some to describe the Claimant Commitment as a list of reasons why a person could be sanctioned or tasks to complete to avoid a

sanction. The close association between responsibilities and sanctions also resulted in participants not viewing the relationship with their Work Coach as one based on mentorship or coaching. Instead, the fortnightly checks on whether they had met their responsibilities felt like a constant scrutiny of their desire to find employment. Additionally, it led to most participants perceiving their Work Coach as the person who would decide whether they would have any money to live on for the next fortnight.

“[She makes me worried as] she’s more upfront and because they’re behind a desk and you’re there, you’re like, oh god. They’re basically an overruling person and it just gets your heart going and you’re like, oh god.” **WSU-ED-BW-046**

“[It’s] like having to see the boss at the end of every month for your wage slip and then thinking, is he going to give me it this time? Basically, picture him sitting behind a desk, he’s got your cheque for the end of the month and then you’re sitting there and he’s waiting to tell you whether you’re getting it or not. That feeling that I might not get it, that’s me; I might lose my job, I might lose my house, this, that or the next thing, car gone. [...] You don’t know if you’re getting it that week.”

WSU-ED-BW-046

Participants regularly spoke about their meeting at the Jobcentre Plus as an interrogation, with comparisons made with bosses, headteachers, police and prison officers, and even state agents of totalitarian regimes. Each comparison highlights how participants’ felt subjugated and anxious over the power of Work Coaches to mete out punishment. The comparisons also make clear the widely shared belief that the default view of the welfare system is that all claimants are potential cheats, already considered guilty, with the responsibility falling upon claimants to dispel this assumption each fortnight.

“Oh God I feel like a criminal when I walk into the Jobcentre. It’s like walking into a prison. It’s hard to explain what I mean. It’s just like this authority figure that is there for the government, and there to look down on you, not to help you get a job but just to try and get you off welfare.” **WSU-GL-AS-015**

When asked whether they would describe the Jobcentre as a supportive organisation, most participants said they would not. Indeed, a common complaint was the overall lack of adequate support. The combination of monitoring and punishment was what participants drew upon instead to describe the role of the Jobcentre.

“Sanctions is 90 per cent of it now. Benefits is just because it’s got the name benefits in it. They feel they kind of have to keep going on because it’s – you can’t get rid of the social, you know welfare state without ruffling a few feathers in this country. As much as they want to try and destroy it. Yes, I think that it has to exist.” **WSU-IN-SW-001**

5.2 Impersonalised Support

DWP policy documents emphasise personalising and tailoring support and conditionality (Department for Work and Pensions 2013). However, reports of personalised support were rare. Where it occurred, it was commonly attributed to individual Work Coaches or specialist Disability Employment Advisors (DEAs). However, the changing operational structure of Jobcentre Plus contributed to these experiences being rare. For example, despite the near unanimous praise DEAs received in interviews, there has been a sharp reduction in the number employed by the DWP. Of those remaining, their job role has changed from working directly with claimants to primarily providing assistance to other Work Coaches.

“I specifically had [...] the Disability Employment Advisor. [...] And he was really good at it. He was really supportive and caring and that, and it was so nice. I felt very safe and secure [...] I do feel like they do help me.” **WSU-IN-SW-002**

Some variation between Work Coaches was attributed to how they opted to use the discretion available to them, such as when to make a sanction referral and how readily they were to do so. Yet, participants were quick to caveat that despite an overall positive experience with a specific Work Coach compared to others, they remained limited in the support and assistance they could provide. There was also recognition that Work Coaches were managing heavy workloads and constrained for time, with a visible reduction in staff in Jobcentres. Some participants additionally explained the conflictual relationship between claimants and Work Coaches as a product of the pressure Work Coaches were under to achieve sanction targets.

“I think basically it’s all very well blaming these people in the Jobcentre, you can blame them for being employed there, but they are being put under pressure, political. Right now the approach [from government] is - [...] everybody is lazy and treat them hard and we’re going to break them and get them to do what they’re told. [...] it’s like collateral damage, they don’t care, if they decide that they want to reduce the expenditure on the welfare system, they just go about it, totally unfeeling and inhumane.” **WSU-GL-SW-002**

It was more common for participants to report that there was no tailoring of support and conditionality to account for their mental health, with a one size fits all conditionality for all deemed fit to work. This was largely attributed to the lack of power claimants had over their job search requirements and the punitive structure of welfare policy. In general, there was a sense the Jobcentre’s role was to relentlessly push people towards employment, with little consideration of its appropriateness for the claimant. Those who reported speaking out rarely said it led to a change in their job search requirements. In many cases, participants were reluctant to challenge the expectations placed on them for fear it would be taken as evidence of failure to comply and provoke a sanction referral. This included a situation where participants considered the expectations placed upon them as damaging to their health or near impossible to consistently achieve.

“I said, ‘There’s what I’ve got [done]; and I showed them, but oh no, five days a week, ‘You need to do this five days a week. Is that all right with you?’ I went, ‘Aye; you don’t want to be awkward with them in case they stop your money.’” **WSU-ED-BW-036**

The hollowing out of Jobcentre Plus was another reason given for the lack of personalised support. Many participants rarely saw the same Work Coach each fortnight. This inconsistency in which Work Coach they saw and the shortness of each meeting reduced the opportunity to discuss mental health. Those who had experienced traumatic events found it especially difficult having to repeatedly explain this to multiple people they had never met before.

“They don’t delve into your situation. Every time it’s a different person so every time you need to tell the whole story ‘My son is on child protection. I faced domestic violence in the past. I am on benefits. I can’t do work because I’m attending some counselling and everything’. Every time you need to repeat it. Then this is what they say ‘But you need to start looking for work’. So it’s a limited amount you have to listen.” **WSU-LO-KJ-035**

A few participants only received adjustments to job search requirements when taking a support worker to their Jobcentre appointments. One participant described this as initially embarrassing as he did not want other claimants to know that he was there with a support worker from a mental health organisation. Yet despite this hesitation, he reported it as something he would now recommend to everyone as with a support worker present his Work Coach became more respectful and considerate. For other participants, it was only on reaching a crisis point where they were severely distressed whilst at the Jobcentre that their mental health received recognition.

“They didn’t tell you any other options on how you can help yourself until you go in there and you completely break down, and you’re crying, and you’ve got the children with you, and you’re screaming and you can’t control yourself. Then they put you into a side room, and then they say, ‘Oh, right, well, we can do this so that you haven’t got to go through this anymore.’ It was at that point that the Jobcentre gave me a sick note.” **WSU-BR-AS-015**

5.3 Pressure

Within its advice for Universal Credit claimants, the DWP says that Work Coaches will “support and challenge you to fulfil your potential and help you to raise your expectations of what you can achieve” (DWP 2019). In contrast to this mentorship model, participants spoke of feeling disempowered by impersonal relationships with Work Coaches and that the mixture of conditionality and sanction-backed support created a constant oppressive pressure. The pressure was to consistently meet job search requirements, with the burden of responsibility for finding employment placed upon claimants.

This contributed to many claimants feeling the difficulty of finding work as a personal failure. Others, however, criticised the pressure that was placed on claimants, viewing it as unfair when a person had a history of employment, had become unemployed for reasons beyond their control, and/or because of a lack of suitable jobs for everyone.

“Every time I go in and sign on, I feel like I am signing my name to the fact that in the past two weeks I have failed, and I have failed to find a job. [...] It’s got harder to approach [staff at the Jobcentre], it’s got harder to walk in there, and that feeling of failure is even more evident actually, because the pressure’s been put more onto you to find work, to find something. But in fact you feel like you’ve done something wrong.” **WSU-PE-JM-027**

“I think if somebody’s worked hard all their life, and through no fault of their own they’re unemployed, [...] because of health reasons they can’t cope any more, or whatever reason, I think it’s no fault of their own. They shouldn’t be putting pressure on them.” **WSU-ED-BW-036**

The unrelenting nature of conditionality led many participants to feel that their job searching efforts and any history of employment received little to no recognition from the Jobcentre. Having previously met all job search expectations each fortnight was not enough to provide reassurance that any leniency would be shown if they struggled the next. This was a particular anxiety for participants who did not regularly see the same Work Coach. With the possibility of a sanction always looming in the background, the sense of pressure rarely eased up.

“I know what I’m supposed to do and I do it but it does feel very pressured and I still haven’t been able to figure out why. I know what I have to do. I go [to an agency] once a week. I sign on once every two weeks and every day I go on Direct Gov but there’s always weeks [...] where I don’t apply for a job because there’s nothing to apply for and I always feel like I’m waiting for an axe to fall because I haven’t applied for anything.” **WSU-ED-SJ-005**

Mandatory courses and Work Programme placements, while appreciated by some, were largely seen as intensifying the monitoring of claimants and creating further opportunities for sanctions. For example, Work Programme placements often required regular attendance at the provider’s offices where claimants would sit at rows of computers applying for jobs. A few without IT access found this helpful, but for others the lack of support from staff meant they were not achieving anything more than they were not previously from home. Yet despite rarely finding courses and placements beneficial towards finding employment, if not an outright waste of time, participants still attended as failure to attend would result in a sanction. Like the complaints of the lack of adjustments to Claimant Commitments to account for any mental health problems, some participants found the inflexible demands of a Work Programme placement hard to comply with.

“[The Work Programme provider] don’t understand the mental health side. [...] They just have no consideration. All they want is to hit their targets and for me to do their training and get back to work. They were sending me out appointments for two weeks at a time where I was supposed to be in every day for nearly six hours at a time. [...] I can’t sit in front of the computer for nearly four hours a day [...] and it was a case of if you don’t then you could lose your benefit.” **WSU-PE-JM-010**

6 Impacts of Conditionality

Proponents of welfare conditionality often present it as a means to encourage benefit claimants to engage in more job search activity which should increase their prospects of finding work (Department for Work and Pensions 2010; Mead 2011). However, the most commonly reported impacts were financial hardship and emotional distress as a result of a sanction; persistent stress and anxiety, leading some to engage in activities to avoid a sanction that were counter-productive to finding employment; and, a worsening of mental health, including participants reporting conditionality had undone any progress they had made towards recovery from mental health problems.

6.1 Sanctions

Sanctions were a common experience amongst the participants, with 57 (40%) reporting having received one or more sanctions by their Wave C interview. The impacts of sanctions were profoundly negative. With benefit payments stopped for a minimum of four weeks, participants struggled to find money to buy necessities, such as food, and accumulated debts. It is clear from the way participants spoke of sanctions that the material deprivation they caused also had a painful emotional impact. Although officially benefit sanctions should not affect Housing Benefit, many participants reported it was stopped when they received a sanction, leading to rent arrears and fears they would be evicted. Friends and family were a common form of financial support, but placed stress on the relationships and caused concerns for whether participants could afford to pay them back. Having to turn to Food Banks was reported as stigmatising and damaging to self-esteem.

“[My support worker] set me up with food banks and you can only get three of them, which I turned up there and I felt so dirty, so low. No confidence at all because I had to fall onto society to help me out [...] I thought being on the, I didn’t want to go on to benefit anyway, do you know what I mean? Because I was happy with working. But my confidence, my health...” **WSU-BR-JM-010**

“I was utterly humiliated. In fact I was in tears when I left the building, absolutely devastated, emotional wreck. Well, I’m going to be homeless. How am I going to feed myself? How am I even going to get from A to B? You have nothing and nothing was given to you, no handouts at all, [...] I

was just told, 'You're sanctioned, that's it, end of.'” **WSU-ED-SJ-017**

Sanctions were often applied when participants were late for or failed to attend meetings at the Job-centre or Work Programme provider, or when a Work Coach considered participants as not having engaged in enough job searching activity. In the majority of cases, participants considered sanctions to have been unjustly applied. Late and missed appointments were commonly a result of factors outside participants' control, such as unreliable public transport, issues with their health, or failure to communicate appointment times by the DWP. Sanctions relating to job searching activity were perceived to be arbitrary, with participants commonly sanctioned when seeing a new Work Coach having completed the same level of activity that their prior Work Coach considered sufficient. Mandatory reconsiderations that frequently upheld the original decision and appeal forms being lost added to the cynicism that sanctions were applied inappropriately.

“[The sanction referral] still went away, it was my first sanction because I did everything to avoid sanctions, I jumped through every hoop they asked me to jump through. That's what was so upsetting about being sanctioned, because I played to their every rule and I still got sanctioned. I did appeal it, I did hand it in and I've never heard back, I've never heard back, ever.” **WSU-GL-AS-015**

Proponents of conditionality have argued that sanctions encourage positive behaviour change, and that in response to a sanction claimants should increase their job search activity and, thus, their chances of returning to employment. Participants, however, strongly rejected that reasoning as sanctions severely disrupted the flow of everyday life. When in the midst of a sanction, the struggle to get by distracted attention from job hunting. Afterwards, worries over the debts accumulated and emotional fatigue made it hard to focus on job searching.

“[Sanctions have] a very different impact. I felt as if you're trying to survive without money that you're due in. You're due that money in. It's for gas, electricity. It's for stuff like that [...] Ducking and diving, trying to get money from somewhere to survive. No, that doesn't make you want to look for a job harder. That just makes you struggle and that two weeks last for ever and makes you ill, I would say, with worry, everything.” **WSU-GL-AS-015**

6.2 Stress and anxiety

Despite whether a person ever received a sanction or not, a fear of sanctions permeated the interviews. Sanctions were perceived as an ever-looming possibility, with participants reporting that they were “frightened to death they're going to sanction me” (WSU-BA-JM-022). As noted in the first section, similar fears pervaded the Work Capability Assessments. It was a common occurrence, therefore, for participants to report stress and anxiety as typifying the impact of conditionality and assessments on

their lives. The drastic impact of sanctions and the ability for assessments to determine the support they were entitled to, and the level of pressure they would experience, was a primary reason why.

“It’s just like a fear of actually losing my right to live. You know what I mean? Because I mean like if you haven’t got any cash you can’t function.” **WSU-ED-BW-026**

“The anxiety inside me is way more. I get heart palpitations and everything and I think too much about some things, so today I was thinking about this assessment and all last night all I was thinking was look, if you don’t tick the boxes you’re not going to get any help and then I’m going to have to go back to Jobseeker’s and I’m going to be forced into having to look for something which I don’t feel like I can cope with right now.” **WSU-BR-JM-013**

The pervasive sense that sanctions could happen at any moment without warning instilled fear amongst participants, regardless of how attentively they adhered to all expectations placed upon them. This consternation was further compounded for participants who had received a sanction or a threat of a sanction following situations where they believed they had reasonable grounds for why they had been unable to meet their job search expectations or were late to an interview. Following such an experience fear would turn to panic, where participants would worry about anything that could go wrong and create a situation where they may be sanctioned. Others became resigned, believing that it was not a case of if but when they would inevitably be sanctioned.

“I was really worried [after receiving a sanction threat after the bus didn’t turn up], I was getting stressed out about a simple thing like signing on. I’d heard people talk about that in the past and I couldn’t image how it’s possible. But it is possible because this just seemed to happen to me [...] I just hated the whole thing. I was terrified I was going to be late. I was phoning my daughters the night before and say, ‘Give me a call before you go to work and make sure I’m up and I don’t sleep in’” **WSU-GL-SW-002**

As seen in the above quote, the sign on appointment at the Jobcentre was often the focal point of fear. The level of stress and anxiety would fluctuate, building up as the next sign-on appointment approached causing sleepless nights. Some reported a brief respite on leaving their appointment, knowing they were financially OK for the next fortnight, only for the cycle of stress and anxiety to build up in intensity again.

“The day before [I sign on] I’m a nervous wreck [...] It’s only when I’ve walked into that office, signed, and come back out, that’s when I relax, and then I relax for a week and then you start that build-up again. I remember thinking my God, this is not good for your heart at all, because I’m having [...] a week] of stress. [...] I freaked out like hell the first year [I was claiming].” **WSU-ED-SJ-005**

Subsequent UK Governments have defended welfare conditionality as facilitating positive behaviour change, whereby participants increase their job search activity and desire to find employment. There

was evidence of behaviour change amongst participants, but not in the manner claimed by proponents of conditionality. The stress and anxiety fostered by conditionality frequently triggered a hyper-vigilant adherence to conditionality. Participants would engage in all activity they could manage to avoid a sanction, including activity that offered little benefit to improving their prospects for returning to employment. For example, participants spoke about how “they described everything [in their job search log] down to the last sentence” (WSU-ED-BW-046), applied for jobs they had applied for before, or even jobs they were unqualified for. The focus became on ensuring that they met their job search targets, whatever it took. Even where participants drastically increased the number of jobs they were applying for, it was carried out in a panicked state that would be unlikely to increase their chances of success.

“I haven’t [been sanctioned] because I quite religiously write down my job searches and all of that [...] because I know if I didn’t do it that they’ll stop my money and I’ll not have any housing benefit paid and I’ll have debt letters from the council sayings that I’m in hundreds of pounds of debts. That makes me really anxious and that. I can hardly sleep as it is, so.” **WSU-ED-BW-023**

“[Interpreter translating] [The threat of sanctions] has stressed her out all the time because she was very anxious and it was keep looking, keep searching, she had this enormous fear above her, that if I don’t it will be, just stop my benefit, and therefore she was keep, keep searching, keep looking, keep doing things.” **WSU-LO-PD-002**

6.3 Worsening mental health

Participants mentioned repeatedly that conditionality worsened their mental health. Both by exacerbating pre-existing conditions but also that the stress, anxiety, and low mood arising in response to conditionality was creating mental health problems. The level of pressure to persist in actively seeking employment, with little recognition of the impact of any mental health conditions or their efforts, was draining for participants. Along with the constant anxiety, there were frequent reports of being worn-down and depressed due to the experience of conditionality.

“I feel that forcing you’s actually putting too much pressure on you, because it’s ending up it’s actually giving you more health issues, like stress and a bit of depression and things like that, whereas I would never have been like that before. Whereas I’ve felt really stressed.” **WSU-GL-AS-035**

“The only role they’ve had is just destroying my life, not bettering it. They’re just making it harder every time for you. It’s driving people to depression and everything.” **WSU-MA-KJ-009**

The fear permeating the welfare system inflamed the impact of conditionality for those with anxiety conditions. Across the interviews, participants were worried their mental health would not be recognised and they would be subject to conditions that would be difficult or impossible to meet due to their health. Unproductive and stressful interactions with the DWP or Work Programme providers then stoked these fears and worsened their anxiety. One participant started experiencing panic attacks following a traumatic experience at a Work Programme placement. A member of staff had started casting doubt on her health conditions, employment history, and eligibility for benefits, leaving the participant terrified she would be left without any means of subsistence.

“Even my doctor has had me signed off for it [depression and anxiety]. I take anxiety attacks, I take sharp pains in my chest, and everything. And just like dealing with people on the phone, and not getting anywhere, it’s just like melt down. And I can’t deal with it.” **WSU-IN-AS-005**

“It was like some kind of Nazi interrogation or something. It was just horrific. [...] I sort of went into a like a panic attack where I just found it emotionally [difficult] and I completely freeze and I can’t [do anything] for about two days. [...] I’ve developed panic attacks and anxiety attacks, because the whole thing [with the staff member at the Work Programme].” **WSU-LO-SJ-017**

For many participants conditionality did not encourage and support them towards finding employment. Instead, the experience of conditionality was strongly discouraging. Being repeatedly told to increase their efforts or being threatened with sanctions despite trying their hardest eroded their self-esteem and had a detrimental impact upon their mental health. Participants often spoke of conditionality impeding their recovery or even moving them “all the way back down to square one” (WSU-MA-KJ-042) in their recovery.

“Well it broke it, my mental health. [...] I was down all the time, I didn’t want to do nothing. I was sitting in a dark room and that, depression. [...] It was just all the rejection and trying to tell me that I wasn’t doing what I was meant to do, but then when someone tries their hardest to do everything, and then out of it, it’s like a kick in the teeth [...] and you just feel like giving up after that, because you’ve been told you’re not doing enough, you’re not doing well enough, so if you’re not doing well enough, why am I fucking bothering, basically.” **WSU-LO-SJ-027**

In a few extreme cases, participants spoke of how the impact of conditionality and sanctions led to suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. For some, the pressure to consistently meet job search expectations under the threat of sanction not only wore them down. That there was no clear route back to employment or alleviation of conditionality despite their mental health created a sense of entrapment. The distance between the intensely stressful and emotionally painful situation they found themselves and returning to meaningful employment appeared unbridgeable. The continuation of conditionality despite their protestations leading them to believe no help was available. Sanctions and

threats of sanction then intensified this, particularly for those exhausting themselves doing everything they could to comply with conditionality. Being sanctioned despite their best efforts then felt like the worst had befallen them and compounded the feeling that they were powerless to escape.

“So you end up falling back in to a deeper little hole. And then it just subsides and that hole gets bigger and bigger, and you’re stuck in it and you think which way am I going to turn? I took an overdose, because of the stress.” **WSU-BR-JM-010**

7 Returns to employment

Few participants in the *Welfare Conditionality* project achieved the stated aim of welfare conditionality, moving back into employment. Amongst the participants there were few returns to employment and often the employment found was temporary. This section covers this overall lack of return that participants attributed to the lack of support from the DWP, how the negative impacts and pressures of conditionality pushed some further away from returning to employment, and where participants had positive experiences how this was attributed to being able to return at their own pace without the unrelenting pressure of conditionality.

7.1 Overall lack of return

Overall, despite regular job search and employment activity, there was little movement into secure employment across the three waves of the project. **Table 7.1** contains the number and percentage of participants who were in employment at each wave. However, these stats need to be interpreted with caution. Participants in the ESA Support Group can engage in “permitted work” of no more than 16 hours or earning over £131.50 a week. A high proportion of participants in the ESA Support Group were engaging in such permitted work (14%, 23%, and 18% at each wave). Additionally, much of the work participants found was part-time and temporary. Of the 16 participants who moved into employment at Wave B only 9 reported still being in employment at Wave C. Therefore, statistics are also provided for how many were in full-time, self, and other employment at each wave.

Table 7.1: Participant employment status by wave.

Status	Wave A	Wave B	Wave C
Unemployed	116 (81%)	88 (71%)	71 (68%)
Employment	28 (19%)	36 (29%)	33 (32%)
Employed full-time	7 (5%)	15 (12%)	12 (12%)
Self-employed	5 (3%)	4 (3%)	3 (3%)
Other employed	16 (11%)	17 (14%)	18 (17%)

Most participants reported that the Jobcentre Plus did little to help participants into employment. Often, they did not share the DWP view that support and conditionality went hand-in-hand and instead argued that conditionality had replaced support. The most common description of Jobcentre Plus appointments was a short five-minute meeting where they signed on and had their job search activity scrutinised. Others noted that the Jobcentre Plus no longer provides its own support, and they felt it now merely existed to refer claimants to Work Programme placements and mandatory courses.

“It’s like you’re being forced, you’re being pushed into something, rather than being coaxed or helped.” **WSU-ED-BW-001**

As previously noted, most did not find the placements and courses supportive and felt like they were going in circles after being referred to the same course a second or third time. A couple of participants thought this was a result of the limited support the Jobcentre Plus could now provide and another course referral was the only option they had. Commonly, participants who found employment attributed their success to their efforts and spoke of finding a job despite the Jobcentre Plus rather than thanks to it.

“The Jobcentre don’t do anything when you go into them. I can honestly say the Jobcentre don’t; I mean you sign, they ask you what you’ve been doing, you show them. They don’t do anything to help you look for work.” **WSU-GL-AS-017**

A few participants received support from voluntary and third sector organisations. In contrast to support organised through the DWP, these organisations received near unanimous praise. Participants attending voluntary work clubs found these more useful than Work Programme placements. The staff and atmosphere were considered friendlier, with attendees not receiving warnings for chatting. Attendees were also able to leave when they choose rather than being forced to remain searching for more jobs despite already applying for all they could find. Staff were also considered more helpful at work clubs and took more time providing assistance with preparing job applications and notifying attendees of jobs they had spotted. Furthermore, there was a level of distrust of Work Programme providers as being too eager to push participants into inappropriate jobs.

“Yes, [this mental health support group] are a bit more relaxed. There are actually people there that I know that have been through experiences themselves. I’ve heard people there that have had their health problems and had different things and so they have actually know from experience how difficult things can be. But these other places, [... Work Programme placements] and similar places. I’m not sure whether this is right or not but I think a lot of them, if they get so many people into work, they get a pat on the back. I’m not sure if they even get extra money so I think that there’s pressure on them to just shove anybody into any old job.” **WSU-PE-JM-019**

7.2 Moves away from employment

Many participants spoke of their experience of welfare conditionality as an intolerable bind, between being not yet ready to return to employment and the pressures of conditionality. Across the interviews, participants maintained a high desire to return to employment. However, they felt that conditionality was undermining the possibility of sustained returns to employment through forcing people with mental health problems back into employment before they were ready or into jobs that were inappropriate for them. Participants were fearful that such returns would only be temporary before they were unemployed again and the progress they had made towards recovery undone. This was particularly acute for participants who were found “fit for work” who received little to no adjustments in their job search expectations. Those raising concerns with their Work Coach about ongoing mental health problems or why certain jobs would be inappropriate for them, reported that often the result was a reiteration that they were required to comply with their job search expectations if they wanted to avoid a sanction.

“It actually feels frankly like another shitty stick with which to beat us by the government frankly. I, like I said, I’m in a position where if I’m forced back into work too quickly it’s not going to work and I’m going to be back to where I was before, which is going to cost the government even more money and I don’t want to be there, nobody wants that, including them.” **WSU-BR-JM-016**

“[My experience with the Jobcentre Plus] has been absolutely soul destroying. [...] My body would simple decide it couldn’t deal with this and I’d just put my head down and be away. I think if the system had been more humane I wouldn’t now be quite so far way from the world of work.” **WSU-GL-AS-022**

As seen in the quote above, the failure to recognise both participants’ existing mental health problems and the toll conditionality had upon mental health prevented claimants from making successful moves back to employment. Indeed, for a significant minority the “soul destroying” and “crushing” (WSU-GL-AS-022) experience of conditionality left them feeling that over time their ability to return to employment had decreased. Sanctions were reported by participants to result in the dissolution of their capacity to carry out everyday tasks and further heightened the fear provoked by Jobcentre Plus appointments. This was to the extent that a few reported that they only attended meetings through the intervention of others.

The worsening of mental health over time in the face of the persistent struggle to consistently comply with conditionality led participants to apply/reapply for ESA. Two participants also blamed the stress of conditionality for causing heart attacks that left them with reduced capacity for work. Of those not receiving ESA at Wave A, 20 participants moved into ESA WRAG or the Support Group by Wave B and a further 5 by Wave C. Additionally, 4 participants moved from ESA WRAG to the Support Group between Waves A and B and a further 10 moved between Waves B and C.

“My depression got worse. I felt like everything was going wrong. I couldn’t pay my bills. I spent most of my time curled up in a ball thinking, ‘I should just off myself because nothing’s getting done.’ I couldn’t even - I didn’t go out. I just - I literally just - at one point my partner had to force me to go out just to go to the Jobcentre. I did not want to.” **WSU-BA-JM-011**

“It was really, really affecting me, yes and that’s how I knew I couldn’t go back. I can never go there again. That’s what was stressing me because I knew I couldn’t and then I’d go, ‘Oh God! If I don’t go back I’m going to be sanctioned or I’ve got sanctioned. How am I going to support my kids? How am I going to buy them shoes?’ [...] So I was really, really stressed about that and I do believe that’s what caused the heart attack.” **WSU-GL-AS-015**

Participants who had experience of full job search conditionality on JSA or UC spoke about subsequent moves to ESA WRAG or the Support Group as a relief. Whilst some viewed this as a set-back and retained a strong desire to move back into employment, it was considered preferable to the unendurable pressure of conditionality. For others their relief was mixed with an antipathy towards the DWP for not having assigned them to ESA at the start of their claim. There was a resentment that they had been forced to fight for their eligibility or only having their mental health problems recognised following a serious deterioration in their mental health from struggling to meet their job search expectations.

“I just felt it was a relief that I didn’t need to do that job search. I just felt relief because it was horrendous.” **WSU-GL-SW-004**

“All those threats are gone. So, that’s good. That’s helpful. That was, it was really pressurising me, the Jobseeker’s thing.” **WSU-PE-JM-017**

“Once I was in the right group, then being sanctioned really wasn’t an issue anymore for me because I wasn’t having that pressure of doing all these back-to-work things.” **WSU-PE-JM-021**

Overall, participants viewed conditionality as actively undermining recovery, a sense of stability, and trust between them and their Work Coach. For the small number who received support through a support organisation attending Jobcentre Plus appointments with them, they felt it was only this intervention that had prevented conditionality continuing to wear them down.

“[The support organisation has made] a massive difference. I don’t want to kill myself every day now. Before, I felt like I was at the end. I felt there was nowhere else to go. If it wasn’t for the Welfare Rights people, I’m pretty sure it would have been the end.” **WSU-BR-AS-015**

7.3 Return at own pace

Participants in the Support Group had their sense of relief conflicted with a disappointment. Many who were moved to the ESA Support Group after a period on JSA spoke about how their mental health had improved now they were no longer subject to conditionality. Yet whilst they were glad they were no longer continually worrying about sanctions, there was also a frustration that there was little real support provided to those in the Support Group. This arose from the way conditionality and support are intricately linked, whereby the lack of conditionality for those in the Support Group meant there was also less opportunity to take part in training courses or receive back-to-work support. Furthermore, participants were fearful that engaging in work preparation would be taken as evidence of fitness to work that would see them moved to JSA that they felt unable to cope with.

“There’s not much helpful - I found, whenever I first signed up for it, it was just, ‘Get on your Universal Jobmatch. Do your 35 hours. If you don’t, you’re screwed.’ It was said as plainly as that and as soon as I got the doctor’s sign-off, it all changed. ‘Oh, you don’t have to do this now, you don’t have to do this now.’ ‘Cool, cool,’ and since then, it’s just been nothing. I don’t mind being forgotten about in that sense, but that’s because it’s not causing me stress and I think, as I say, in the last year, my mental health probably has got better. I do wonder if that’s because they’ve just left me.” **WSU-IN-SW-001**

This concern that the DWP and Jobcentre Plus were assessing claimants as more ready to return to employment than claimants themselves pervaded the interviews. Many participants repeatedly stressed that they wanted to return to employment, but they felt that the Jobcentre Plus was pushing claimants to return too fast and into any job despite its appropriateness for them. In contrast, they emphasised that they would feel more secure if they could return at their own pace and being able to decline applying for certain jobs that would not support their recovery. For some, this meant there was a need for space and time for recovery first, before expecting a person to actively search for employment. Whilst this may take longer, they argued that returns to employment would be more sustainable as people would return when they were able to cope with it.

As well as the reports of improved mental health from movements into the Support Group, there was also evidence that a slower and non-pressured pace supported both recovery and increasing confidence to return to employment. Some participants receiving ESA WRAG spoke about it providing greater security than JSA as there was less chance of receiving a sanction. Furthermore, they also spoke of having a sense of progress and being able to see a route back to employment. This was in stark contrast to many participants in the Support Group who felt abandoned or those on JSA or with full conditionality on UC who spoke more of being stuck in a rut or slowly being grinded down.

“No, I didn’t feel as secure with Jobseekers as I do with the ESA. I like what I hear from the advisors. I can see the way forward. I can see the confidence building, the CV, I can believe in myself. I can see

that I'm ready but not quite ready to go back out into the big bad world so to say." **WSU-ED-BW-027**

However, the experience of ESA WRAG was not universally positive. A few participants who felt they were not ready to prepare to return to employment found the pressure to regularly attend meetings and courses stressful. A factor in this was Work Coach discretion in the level of work preparation expectations, and hence conditionality, placed on claimants. Expectations, therefore, varied from a monthly phone call to attending a mandatory job preparation course a few days a week. Furthermore, there was variance in how useful participants found the support provided. As with Work Programme placements, support was provided by third-party contractors and focused on CV writing, interview skills, and job searching strategies. Participants lacking confidence in these areas benefited from the placements, whereas others felt they were not receiving the support they needed.

"[Overall, I like ESA WRAG] In order to be able to get better you need a little bit of interaction with people, not a lot, [...] but you don't want the full whack of pressure because that's too much. It's like you have to go at a snail's pace but at least you're going forward. So, yes, for me it was better to be on the ESA [WRAG] and go to the interviews, but when you got there they weren't really much use as in telling you which course to go on that was suitable for you." **WSU-SH-JM-016**

"It was getting put in the right group was the turning point for me because I just simply wasn't ready to work. I'd spent years being able to cope with all my finances, never in debt or anything like that and then from the time of having to leave my job and getting another job, I just had several years of a downward spiral and, yes, being put in the group where you supposed to attend appointments at the point, really, where you're kind of ready for work. You just need a bit of support. That wasn't the right category for me which caused a lot of sanctions." **WSU-PE-JM-021**

8 Conclusion

Overall, this secondary analysis of longitudinal interviews with participants from the *Welfare Conditionality* project found that claimants with an experience of mental health problems viewed welfare conditionality as unhelpful in facilitating return to employment. In many regards, mental health was perceived as being invalidated within the welfare system and the pressure and poverty arising from conditionality and sanctions exacerbated mental health problems.

Work Capability Assessments were a profoundly negative experience for participants. They were widely viewed as a cruel and compassionless process aimed at minimising entitlement to disability benefits over assessing a person's support needs. Assessments provided little room to discuss the impact of mental health problems, with the focus predominantly on physical health. Even within the focus on physical health, participants felt the assessment placed too much weight on whether claimants could complete simple physical tasks. A significant minority were found "fit for work", including participants with multiple mental and physical impairments. Yet, despite the high success rate of appeals, there was also evidence that the confusing appeals process and poor advice resulted in some participants not lodging an appeal.

Participants felt disempowered within the welfare system as a result of the greater emphasis placed on the sanctions backed behavioural requirements over the provision of personalised support. Indeed, there was a sense amongst participants that the main purpose of the welfare system had shifted in favour of sanctions over support. Few participants received adjustments to their job search requirements after raising concerns that they would find it difficult to meet them due to their mental health. In contrast to the language of personalised and tailored support used by the DWP, most participants viewed their relationship with Work Coaches as frictional and concerned primarily with the enforcement of conditionality. As a result, participants reported that they faced an unrelenting pressure to consistently comply with conditionality, where increasing levels of what the Jobcentre Plus classified as support was experienced as further monitoring and creation of more opportunities for applying a sanction. Moving into the Support Group which triggered a cessation for conditionality was viewed ambivalently since there was also a removal of return-to-work support, with some interviewees still wanting to try to attain paid employment.

There was scant evidence that sanctions backed conditionality promoted "positive behaviour change" through increasing job search activity and promoting returns to employment. Reports of intense

stress and persistent anxiety permeated the interviews. Where this led to increased activity, it was an unproductive hyper-compliance to meeting conditionality that led to practices that would not increase prospects of finding work. The ever-looming possibility of receiving a sanction was a major factor fuelling reports of anxiety. Sanctions themselves had profoundly negative impacts, resulting in increased poverty, debts, and reliance upon friends, family, and voluntary organisations for support. For many the emotionally draining experience of conditionality and material hardship arising from sanctions exacerbated mental health problems and made recovery difficult.

In contrast to promoting moves back into employment, most participants remained unemployed across the three waves of interview and many moved into employment being precarious and temporary. Often participants described moves into employment as occurring despite the Jobcentre Plus. The pressures of sanctions backed conditionality and the negative impact this had on participants' health also led some to feel they were moving further away from employment. In contrast, the participants who spoke of making progress with both their mental health and readiness to return to employment attributed this to situations where they could progress at their own pace without feeling constantly under pressure to comply with demanding behavioural requirements.

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