NEW ECONOMICS FOUNDATION

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# TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT:

## RETHINKING CONDITIONALITY TO SUPPORT MORE PEOPLE INTO BETTER JOBS

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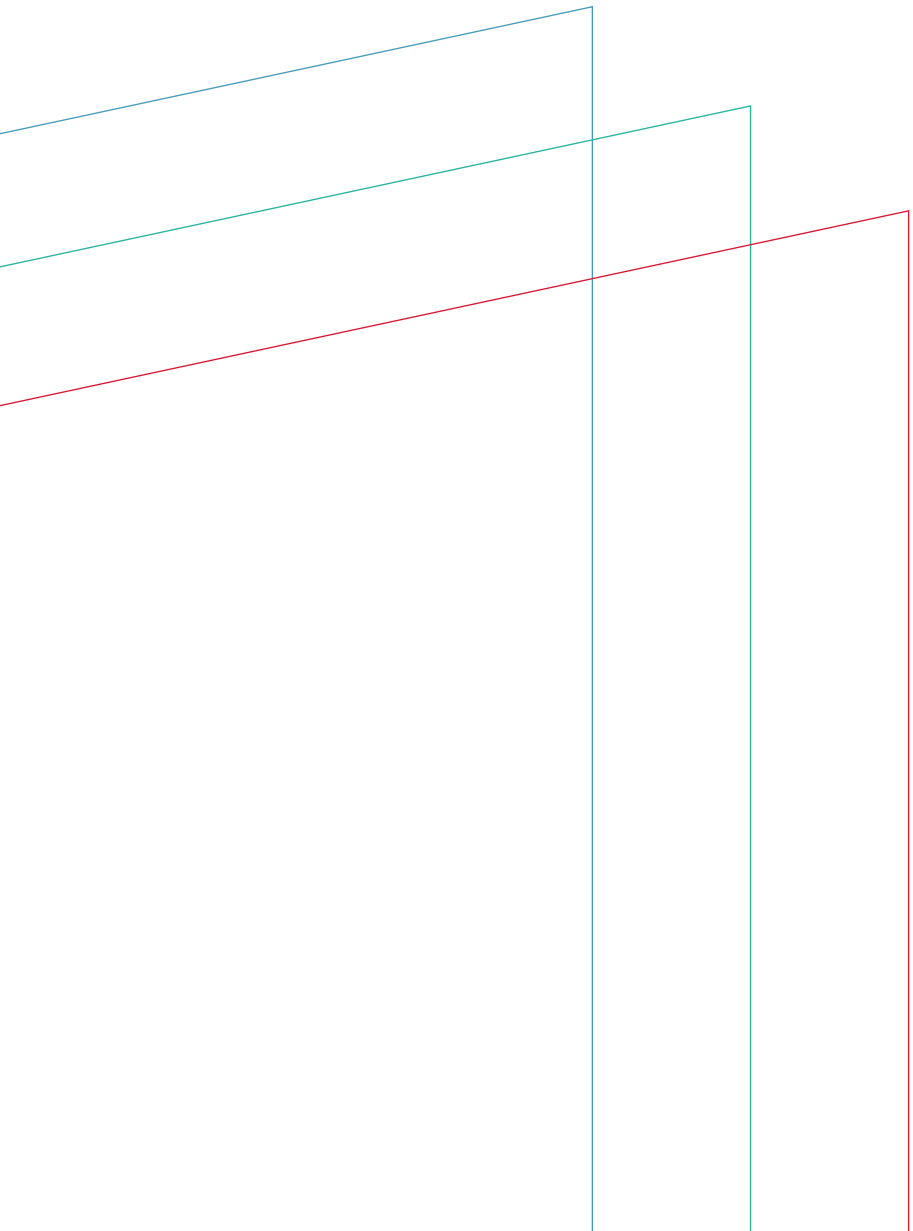

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conditionality – the requirements placed on people on certain work-related benefits – is often presented as both necessary, to limit the time people spend on benefits, and popular with the public. This report, however, argues that increasingly strict and prescriptive conditionality is driving perverse outcomes and is neither understood by the public nor aligned with how they think people should be treated.

Based on a comprehensive suite of research – deliberative workshops with people with experience of the current system, discussions with employment support professionals, and detailed exploration of public opinion – we set out the case for an alternative approach that would better balance support and accountability, to improve experiences and outcomes while retaining public support and consent.

## THE CONTEXT: A FAILING SYSTEM

The Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) approach to employment support is failing on two key fronts. A record number of people feel unable to engage with Jobcentres because of disabilities and poor health. Instead, they are seeking refuge from the strict and prescriptive conditionality and inadequate financial support that people on universal credit are subject to if they are considered able to work. Meanwhile, those who are required to seek work are often being pushed by the current model of conditionality into low-paid and insecure jobs with little prospect of progression.

The entrenched assumption that people need to be closely monitored and directed to move them towards work, and a belief that the public demands such an approach, has meant that the strictness, prescriptiveness and reach of conditionality have been extended time and time again, despite growing evidence that this is helping to drive these system failures.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) has argued that we need a shift in focus from enforcing compliance with benefit rules to fostering genuine engagement with employment support, tapping into people's ambitions, resources, and intrinsic motivation. Other countries, most notably Germany, have explicitly moved in this direction.

A trend towards more localised design and delivery of employment support – one that Labour has indicated it will look to accelerate – is welcome. It will lend itself to a greater focus on getting people into good jobs, as well as more integrated support for those with additional barriers. However, the gains this could bring will be undermined by the current strict and prescriptive model of conditionality and the impact it has on the quality of engagement and job outcomes.

## THE SERVICE USER PERSPECTIVE

We ran deliberative workshops in Camden and Manchester with people currently or recently in contact with Jobcentres, to hear about their experiences of support and their ideas for reform. Participants in both workshops spent two days exploring different aspects of the current system, reflecting on ideas and evidence they were presented with, and developing creative solutions.

Participants universally reported that Jobcentres did not feel like a welcoming or supportive place. They highlighted a fundamental tension between the role work coaches played in enforcing conditionality and the supportive coaching role participants wanted them to focus on:

> "How can a work coach support me but police me at the same time?"

Rather than feeling motivated by the threat of sanctions, participants tended to report that conditionality undermined the quality of engagement and meant they were primarily focused on doing what was required to avoid punishment, rather than working collaboratively towards their ambitions:

> "The real problem with conditionality is that it's so limiting to interactions with your work coach."

Participants consistently reported feeling they were being pushed into any available work as quickly as possible, with little focus on the job quality or their individual preferences or ambitions:

> "You should be given time to find the right jobs because bad jobs just make you miserable."

Given the opportunity to reimagine Jobcentres, participants set out a vision for a warm and welcoming space, where people would choose to go for support. They wanted to see a much greater focus on careers advice, skills, and training, alongside recognition of the range of barriers to work many people experience and the personalised support needed to overcome these:

> "If the quality of Jobcentre support is good enough, that would be the real incentive to engage."

On conditionality specifically, participants wanted to see a much greater emphasis on developing a plan of support collaboratively, rather than having this imposed through a homogenous 'claimant commitment', with the threat of sanctions only ever used as a last resort.

## THE PROVIDER PERSPECTIVE

We convened a roundtable of employment support professionals from local authorities, third-sector providers, and national companies with experience in delivering DWP contracts. We shared the findings from the deliberative workshops and asked for their response.

There was widespread agreement that the DWP-led system was far too focused on enforcing compliance with benefits rules and not enough on providing employment support:

> "Jobcentres aren't job centres. They're just benefits tick boxes. It's not to do with jobs anymore."

The message from the workshops - that this focus on compliance was directly undermining the quality of engagement - also resonated with providers. They all said they preferred working with people on a voluntary basis and were reluctant to be complicit in the current model of conditionality:

> "As you mandate someone, you're forcing them to do something. You're never going to get them to really engage are you?"

We presented a proposal for an approach to improve engagement by only imposing prescriptive conditionality if it was shown to be required after an initial period of attempted voluntary engagement. Providers supported this proposal and felt it would produce better outcomes than the current approach:

> "It would be better if it was voluntary engagement… give people the trust that they deserve for the first few months."

## THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

We then set out to explore whether what we had heard in our deliberative workshops and provider roundtable could be reconciled with public opinion and whether there was a path to gaining consent and support for a less strict and prescriptive approach to conditionality.

We ran two public focus groups, with participants selected based on being on a middle to higher income and holding moderate existing views on the benefits system – ie not strongly sympathetic or critical of people supported by benefits.

As expected, at a headline level there was widespread support for the overarching principle of conditionality, on the basis that some kind of mechanism of accountability is both fair and necessary:

> "We must have that. Otherwise, we're going to end up with people on benefits for years."

Participants, however, were surprised to hear how strict and prescriptive the current model of conditionality is. They were concerned that pushing people into any available jobs didn't feel like a fair or effective approach to sustaining people in work in the long term:

> "They're more likely to fall out of work again. If somebody's in a job that they've been forced into and they're not happy, then they're not going to stick it."

Participants also recognised the tension between the work coach's roles of providing support and policing benefit rules and could see how this would undermine the relationship:

> "How good a trust can there be, or how good a relationship can there be, when there is such a power imbalance?"

Although there was a divergence of views about exactly how an alternative approach should operate, there was widespread agreement that fostering genuine engagement with employment support where possible, as opposed to simply enforcing compliance, would produce better outcomes:

> "I think once you get people to buy into that whole journey, you get more out of it. But people have got to know what they're going to get at the end of it for them to join that journey."

Building on the insights from these focus groups, we commissioned polling to gauge wider public understanding of the current system and receptiveness to an alternative approach. Our key findings were that the public:

- underestimate how strict and prescriptive the current model of conditionality is:
  - The median estimate of the typical amount of time per week people are required to seek work was 13 hours – in reality, it's 35 hours.
  - The median estimate for how long people can seek a job in a preferred field before they must accept any job was three months – it's actually just one month.
- already favour a more flexible, trusting, and supportive approach in general:
  - 69% favoured trying to get people into fairly paid, secure jobs with opportunities for progression over getting people into any job as soon as possible.
  - 62% thought Jobcentres should prioritise offering a positive service to those who want support over enforcing sanctions against those who don't follow the rules.
- are receptive to arguments that conditionality may harm experience and outcomes:
  - 58% found the argument that strict and prescriptive conditionality undermines the quality of job outcomes convincing, with only 27% finding it unconvincing.
  - 54% found the argument that it undermines the quality of the relationship with the work coach convincing, with only 29% finding it unconvincing.
- can see the benefits of an approach that defaults towards voluntary engagement:
  - Presented with the current approach to conditionality and an alternative where the default would be voluntary engagement unless a need for more strict and prescriptive requirements was demonstrated, over 60% of people thought our alternative would improve the quality of engagement and job outcomes.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research clearly suggests that strict and prescriptive conditionality is not only ineffective but is often actively harmful to experiences and outcomes. Meanwhile, although the public wants some mechanism of accountability in the system, they support an approach that prioritises positive engagement over a focus on tightly policing the rules to ensure compliance.

As a first step, we recommend ending the most strict and prescriptive aspects of the current approach to conditionality, such as a specified number of hours per week of job search and the requirement to apply for and accept any job recommended by a work coach.

We also call for more comprehensive reform to be trialled with people starting on universal credit who would be subject to full conditionality. This approach would look to maximise genuine engagement with support and would only resort to conditionality as a backstop:

- During an initial period (we suggest three months), work coaches would look to engage with people voluntarily, with a focus on understanding their experiences, skills, aspirations, and barriers and building an effective working relationship.

- Support should be flexible and built around a genuinely co-produced plan, which sets out mutual expectations between the work coach and the person they are supporting, but not prescriptive requirements to be monitored and enforced.

- If, after an initial period of attempted voluntary engagement, there is no evidence of activity or progress, a work coach could request a review as to whether more prescriptive conditionality is required. Additional barriers such as disabilities, health conditions, and caring responsibilities should exempt people from this.

- If more specific requirements are set but not met, a warning and another review should occur before any sanctions are imposed. Sanctions should never take a household below a minimum level of income necessary for them to meet their essential costs. Sanctions should also be refundable if someone reengages.

This approach would shift the system away from a starting question of"How much conditionality is it reasonable to place on this person?"to one of"How can we most effectively engage with and support this person?". Our research suggests that this could hugely improve people's experience of and commitment to employment support, particularly for those facing additional barriers. It would help more people into better jobs, while also maintaining public consent and support.

# INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In our social security system, 'conditionality' refers to expectations people are required to meet as a condition of receiving certain work-related benefits. It is often presented as a political necessity because of its perceived effectiveness at driving desired behaviours and its apparent public popularity. This report argues that the strict and prescriptive way conditionality is currently used actually undermines effective employment support and that public desire for some degree of accountability in the social security system has been falsely conflated with support for this approach. We propose a more flexible, trusting, and supportive approach and present evidence that it could more effectively help people into good jobs and could command public consent and support.

## A FAILING APPROACH

Our social security system has been under increased scrutiny recently due to growing concerns about the number of people who are 'economically inactive' (ie out of work and not expecting to return to work) due to disabilities and poor health. The previous government argued that people are too easily finding their way onto higher rates of benefit that come with protections from expectations to prepare for and seek work. The underlying logic of their proposed reforms was that people need to be driven into work by strict conditions, backed up by the threat of benefit sanctions.

However, the Office for Budgetary Responsibility (OBR) has suggested that it could be precisely these conditions and threats that are driving many people to seek refuge from conditionality by demonstrating that disabilities and health conditions limit their ability to work.[1] The previous government's plans to tighten eligibility criteria would mean that, by 2028/29, 457,000 fewer people would receive the higher rates of benefits and protections from conditionality these confer.[2] However, the OBR predicts that only 15,400 of this group – or just over 3% – would find their way into work by this time as a result of being exposed to conditionality.[3]

Even when conditionality does seem to play a role in pushing people towards work, the jobs they end up in tend to be at the lower-paid, fewer-hours, poorer-quality, and more insecure end of the labour market.[4,5,6] This reflects the 'ABC approach' – "Any job first, a Better job next, and into a Career" – pursued by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), where the focus is on getting someone into any job, as soon as possible, rather than trying to find a job that's a good fit for the individual, with good pay and conditions.[7] With only one in six people escaping low pay, there is little evidence that taking "any job" does lead to a better job and then a career.[8]

Analysis by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) has shown that the government could save billions, while raising the living standards of hundreds of thousands of households, if it managed to support people into better-paid and more secure work rather than just any job.[9] This analysis accounts for the assumption that finding a good job may take more time. Some may spend longer on benefits initially, but this is offset by subsequent higher wages and the higher tax revenues and lower benefits spend this entails. A strict and prescriptive approach to conditionality directly undermines people's ability to focus on finding a well-paid and secure job that is a good long-term fit for them, or to develop their skills or retrain to open up the range of jobs available to them.[10,11]

## MOVING FROM COMPLIANCE TO ENGAGEMENT

In a paper last year, NEF argued that the current system of benefits and employment support was far too focused on achieving compliance with conditionality and failed to recognise the detrimental impact this had on its ability to foster genuine engagement.[12] This sort of engagement, built on people's intrinsic motivations to find good work and improve their lives, rather than an extrinsic motivation to avoid punishment, is critical to achieving positive outcomes, especially for those facing additional barriers such as disabilities, poor health, and/or caring responsibilities.

The quality of the relationship between someone receiving employment support and the person providing it is highly predictive of whether positive outcomes will be achieved.[13] In contrast, evidence suggests that highly conditional benefits systems diminish people's level of trust in not just employment support but also local services more widely.[14] The way conditionality is used within universal credit has been linked to worsening mental health for those subject to it.[15] The negative impacts of conditionality are often felt even more acutely by women, disabled people, and Black and minority ethnic communities, by failing to account for additional barriers they may face when seeking work and holding down a job.[16,17,18]

The importance of this shift from a compliance-focused approach to one that prioritises genuine engagement has been recognised and acted on elsewhere. In Germany, the 2023 Citizen's Benefit Act signals an explicit objective of fostering "more cooperation and trust" and a move away from a focus on getting people into "just any job as quickly as possible".[19] Scotland has also placed an emphasis on setting a positive tone for people's interaction with the social security system, describing support as "an investment in people" with "respect for the dignity of individuals" at its heart.[20] This kind of language contrasts sharply with much of the Westminster rhetoric, which has tended to frame the cost of social security as a burden and a result of individual failure.

Local providers of employment support across the UK tend to understand the vital importance of a focus on fostering genuine engagement and many are reluctant to be associated with any schemes or referrals that implicate them in conditionality.[21] With employment support provision increasingly being devolved to local areas – a trend the Labour Party has suggested it will look to accelerate[22] – the strict and prescriptive conditionality currently entrenched in the system will need to be reconciled with local providers' rejection of such an approach.

## MAPPING A PATH TO AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

An approach to employment support built around strict and prescriptive conditionality has persisted due to entrenched beliefs about its effectiveness and popularity. Evidence does suggest that conditionality can reduce the time some people spend on unemployment benefits, but it pays little attention to the quality and sustainability of jobs they are driven into.[23] Public support for the underlying principle of conditionality is often cited but with little attempt to understand the nuances of this so-called support and the implications for how conditionality might be applied.

We are therefore at an impasse, where the policy response to challenges around unemployment has consistently involved cranking up conditionality or looking to extend the scope of who is subject to it (see Box 1). The idea of rolling back conditionality in any way is assumed to be fraught with risk in terms of both the behavioural response of those on benefits and a potential public backlash. Even growing criticism from politicians of the impact of benefit sanctions has failed to translate into substantive proposals to reform conditionality or recognise its wider negative impact on experiences and outcomes regardless of whether it leads to a sanction.This report maps a path for escaping this deadlock:

- The first section sets out why the current approach to conditionality is failing and what is needed to fix it, based on the experience, expertise, and ideas of people in contact with the benefits system and DWP employment support.
- The second section sense-checks these criticisms of the current system and proposals for an alternative approach with a range of providers who deliver employment support at a local level, to see whether they ring true and could be implemented in practice.
- The third section explores the public understanding of how conditionality is used currently, whether they are receptive to critiques of this model, and whether they are open to more nuanced and flexible approaches to managing benefits and employment support.
- The report closes with recommendations for reforming the use of conditionality to prioritise genuine engagement over mere compliance. It sets out suggestions for how to talk about these reforms to retain public support and consent. And it considers the wider changes to employment support required alongside reform of conditionality to improve experiences and outcomes.

**BOX 1: THE EXPANSION OF CONDITIONALITY – KEY DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 2008**

- **2008**
  The introduction of employment and support allowance (ESA), to replace older incapacity benefits, aims to place requirements on some ill and disabled people to attend work-focused interviews to discuss (voluntary) steps they could take towards work.
- **2012**
  The Welfare Reform Act strengthens the use of conditionality and sanctions in jobseekers allowance (JSA) and ESA, including requiring ill and disabled people previously just expected to attend work-focused interviews to undertake any work-related activity.
- **2012**
  Single parents of children aged five and over are required to look for work. In 2008, this threshold was children aged over 16 but it was incrementally reduced since then.
- **2013**
  Universal credit (UC) pilots begin. Regulations introduce a new 'claimant commitment' that can require someone to attend regular Jobcentre appointments, spend up to 35 hours per week searching for work and apply for and accept any job suggested by a work coach (after an initial period of three months to focus on jobs in a chosen field).
- **2016**
  The staggered rollout of UC begins, with claims for 'legacy' working-age benefits (such as JSA and ESA) closed in certain areas.
- **2017**
  Work search requirements are extended to parents of two- and three-year-olds. These were previously only applied to parents of school-age children. Single parents of children aged three and over are now required to look for work.
- **2018**
  The UC rollout is completed. No new claims can be made for legacy working-age benefits and changes of circumstances can result in the 'migration' of existing claims onto UC.
- **2022**
  The time given to someone unemployed on UC to find a job in a preferred field before a stronger threat of sanctions is applied is lowered from three months to four weeks.
- **2023**
  Lead carers of one- and two-year-olds in receipt of UC must meet with a work coach more frequently while parents with children aged 3 to 12 must spend more time searching for work.
- **2023**
  Managed migration onto UC begins for the remaining tax credits caseload, bringing the final in-work households on means-tested benefits within the scope of conditionality.
- **2024**
  The 'administrative earnings threshold' is increased for a third time in three years, more than doubling the number of hours at the national living wage someone needs to work to escape full conditionality on UC. This is set at 18 hours for a single person and 29 for a couple.
- **2025**
  The final phase of UC managed migration is expected to commence and legacy working-age benefits closed entirely.

# THE SERVICE USER PERSPECTIVE

Working in partnership with Manchester City Council and Camden Council, NEF commissioned Involve to help us design and deliver deliberative workshops to:

- hear about participants' experiences of employment support, of the benefits system, and of being subject to conditionality.
- ask participants to reflect on what makes for effective relationships of support in general and help around employment specifically.
- seek participants' views and ideas about how conditionality should be used within employment support for people on benefits, if at all.

We recruited participants for two-day workshops in Manchester (where 18 attended) and Camden (where 19 attended), who currently were, or had recently been, required to attend Jobcentre appointments. The participants were diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, disability, and caring responsibilities (full details of the recruitment process and the characteristics of participants are included in Annexe 1).

Participants were supported through a range of deliberative exercises across the two days – some focused purely on their experiences of the existing system; some involved responding to presentations and prompts; and some asked them to engage in 'future visioning' – building on experiences and the information they had heard and using creative methods to generate new ideas.

We have drawn key insights from what participants said in the workshops and the written outputs they produced in collaboration with facilitators. We have grouped these into a range of themes and split them between an initial focus on participants' current experiences and reflections followed by their ideas for a fairer and more effective model of support.

## PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE CURRENT SYSTEM

We explored a range of aspects of participants' experiences of receiving support from DWP and Jobcentres, prompted by explanations from NEF staff of how the current system is supposed to operate.

**Experiences of attending Jobcentre appointments**

There was a strong consensus among participants in both sets of workshops that the Jobcentre environment and the general experience of visiting Jobcentres were not conducive to them feeling supported, respected, motivated, and engaged.

One of the clearest and most striking themes to emerge was that participants simply wanted to be treated with a basic level of respect and dignity, which many reported not experiencing in Jobcentres. Rather than feeling they were being provided with a service, participants described a sense of being the ones who were expected to serve the demands of Jobcentres:

> "You want to feel valued."

> "Politeness goes a long way."

> [Making a comparison to other services]
> "We're called clients, but we're not treated as ones."

> "You rush to get to an appointment on time and then sometimes made to wait for 5, 10, 15 minutes."

Many participants experienced Jobcentres as unwelcoming and inaccessible spaces. One explained that they struggle with hearing and focus and found the environment did not allow them to engage with the support on offer. There were widespread reports of a lack of flexibility and effective support around health, disabilities, and caring responsibilities:

> "They push you into things and don't take consideration of having a child. Then employers don't take you seriously as a mother. They don't trust you; they think you'll take time off [for childcare]."

Some participants described feeling discriminated against because of their race or ethnicity, being treated without cultural sensitivity, or not feeling well supported with language barriers. Others felt they had been treated poorly due to their gender or age. One participant said they struggle to sleep the night before their appointments because they feel intimidated and judged by the Jobcentre.

Many described how just the look and feel of Jobcentres impacted their experience and meant that they were not a place they'd want to go to voluntarily:

> "I'd describe the colour of Jobcentres as 'shabby magnolia'!"

> "I'd love it if the security guards didn't jump on me and search me as soon as I walked in."

Participants had many ideas for how to improve Jobcentres, explored more fully in the section on ideas for reform, but central to these was the sense that it needed to be a place where people felt comfortable, welcomed, supported, and informed:

> "It needs to be an environment to share your story, your situation, because there will be problems beyond your control that you need help with."

> "It should be more informative; that would help encourage me to look for work."

**The work coach relationship**

There was clear recognition among participants that the quality of the relationship with the person supporting them to seek work was critical to their prospects of getting into a good job. There was also widespread agreement that the role of work coaches as enforcers of conditionality was in direct conflict with their ability to be a trusted source of support:

> "How can a work coach support me but police me at the same time?"

> "Work coaches are supposed to be helping people but at the same time they're trying to catch you out – it should just be about helping people."

Participants wanted personalised support from their work coach, based on a relationship established over time. They reported that often this wasn't the case because they wouldn't see the same work coach consistently or did not feel well supported by those they did see. They felt that the pressure on work coaches to focus on enforcing requirements meant they couldn't give people the time, attention, and support needed to help them find good jobs:

> "Work coaches should have a detailed understanding of your situation, your aims, and your ambitions."

> "You see a different work coach every time." – "Yeah, so if you've managed to build up any sort of rapport then it's gone."

> "There needs to be a free exchange of ideas without all the pressure – too often you just feel like you're being steamrolled and you don't have time to think."

Many participants spoke about being treated poorly by some work coaches but generally recognised that this was likely driven by the system they had to operate within and the pressures on them. These accounts often mirrored the messaging seen within the benefits system and associated political rhetoric, which implies a lack of effort or commitment on the part of those receiving support:

> "I've been made to feel guilty for needing the system. A coach asked me 'What would you do if you didn't have benefits? You'd have to work more.' But I already work part time, and then have to balance childcare commitments as there are no childcare spaces in my area."

> "They don't allow you any adjustments for issues out of your control. One shouted at me because my bus was late due to a crash. Said I should have left earlier."

Where some participants had experienced better support from a work coach – who had managed to provide this despite operating in a system that constrained their ability to do so – it was clear that it had made a significant difference to how they had then interacted with this support:

> "I once had a work coach who always looked for opportunities for me. It made me want to apply more for jobs. I had a sense that there were options and opportunities available to me."

**The claimant commitment**

People on universal credit are required to sign a claimant commitment, which details the specific requirements they are expected to meet to avoid the risk of being sanctioned. These requirements are supposed to be agreed collaboratively and tailored to individual circumstances.

Although participants knew that they faced expectations as part of their receipt of benefits, many were not aware of the claimant commitment specifically, as it was described to them in the workshops. Most did not recall the process being either collaborative or tailored:

> "It was rushed. It wasn't explained to me properly. It felt like a tick-box exercise."

> "Things were in the form that weren't discussed with me."

There was a sense from many participants of a clear power imbalance, where the claimant commitment was serving the Jobcentre/DWP rather than shaping a personalised plan of action and support to help them into work:

> "If you're desperate – you have no money and no job – you will sign anything. But what they're actually getting you to sign is general commitments that you're likely not going to be able to meet because they don't suit your needs."

> "They build failure into the claimant commitment and expect you to default."

Participants were happy with the idea of there being an initial meeting to set an agreed plan but felt this should be much more co-produced and personalised, with a focus on their previous experience, current barriers and future ambitions. There was also a strong steer that this plan should be flexible and adaptable over time.

**Conditionality and sanctions**

When the topic of conditionality and sanctions was first raised, many participants focused initially on the direct impact of being sanctioned, with some participants sharing their stories:

> "Sanctions are so difficult. They pushed me into poverty and foodbanks. They left me with £20 for a month to live off."

> "I was sanctioned while in hospital. They contacted me on the [online universal credit] journal but I couldn't respond because I didn't have my phone with me."

Participants also spoke about the feeling of constantly being under threat from sanctions, how this didn't feel constructive, and the impact it had on many of them:

> "Why go straight to sanctions? I don't get it. What is the aim?"

> "I try every day to find work and the benefits system is still not happy. People like me are still pushed to the very edge. We are being continually punished."

There was a sense from many participants that conditionality was not only creating stress and anxiety for them but also directly undermining the quality of their relationship with their work coach and the Jobcentre, and hence the quality of support they were receiving:

> "The real problem with conditionality is that it's so limiting to interactions with your work coach."

> "If you motivate people to do what they want to do, they'll stick at it longer – they'll do it with love."

> "If the quality of Jobcentre support were good enough, that would be the real incentive to engage."

There was a broad consensus within both groups that there should be a shift to focusing more on good-quality engagement, especially early on in the relationship with the work coach. We explored in more detail with participants what an alternative approach to conditionality, and the kinds of interactions that could form good quality engagement, might look like. Their responses are set out in the section on ideas for reform.

**The quality of support and outcomes**
Alongside the pressurised nature of interactions with Jobcentres, participants also tended to report that the quality of support was poor. Many suggested it felt like both they and the work coach were going through the motions rather than working on a personalised plan and actions:

> "When you're struggling with everyday living, having weekly meetings that don't achieve much creates a point of stress."

> "I log in every day because they send me emails saying they're important, but it's never jobs that are relevant to me – or that I even have the skills for."

> "I don't get offered courses that suit me, it's like the system doesn't care who you are they just want you out of their way."

There was a strong consensus that Jobcentres should be focused on supporting people into secure, well-paid work that fits with people's experience, skills and aspirations:

> "People want to know – is the job any good? Will it pay my bills and will I enjoy it?"

> "You should be given time to find the right jobs because bad jobs just make you miserable."

Most participants, however, suggested that they had been directed to take any work available, with little emphasis placed on what they wanted to be doing or what would be a good fit for them:

> "I was told that I had to just take any job regardless of my skills."

> "I've been told to quit my part-time job and find any full-time job, even if it doesn't use my skills."

> "I'm interacting with a public institution that doesn't engage with the minimum of my potential. This approach is not helping the economy. People will stay in jobs they like."

When it came to work coaches suggesting specific jobs, many participants reported that these were sometimes completely unsuitable or that they weren't the sort of thing they wanted to do but that they felt pressurised to accept for fear of being sanctioned:

> "I was offered a job as a delivery driver. I don't even have a driver's licence!"

> "You get offered a job [you don't want] and you can't turn it down or you risk getting sanctioned. They're not expecting you to do better for yourself."

## PARTICIPANTS' IDEAS FOR REFORM OF THE SYSTEM

Through deliberative and creative exercises, participants in the workshops produced a vast array of ideas for improving the quality of employment support – from small and specific changes to more fundamental reforms. A common thread running through all these suggestions was that people wanted to be treated with respect, trust, and compassion, with a focus on fostering genuine engagement with support rather than just pressuring people to meet conditions. Participants felt that this would both improve people's experiences and increase their chances of finding good jobs.

It was also evident in some of the discussions that many participants found it difficult to imagine a system that was radically different from what they had experienced previously, with the rules and norms that framed that experience. Narratives about the need to prevent people from abusing the system also continued to have a strong influence on discussions, even when participants felt from personal experiences that a less punitive system would be more effective.

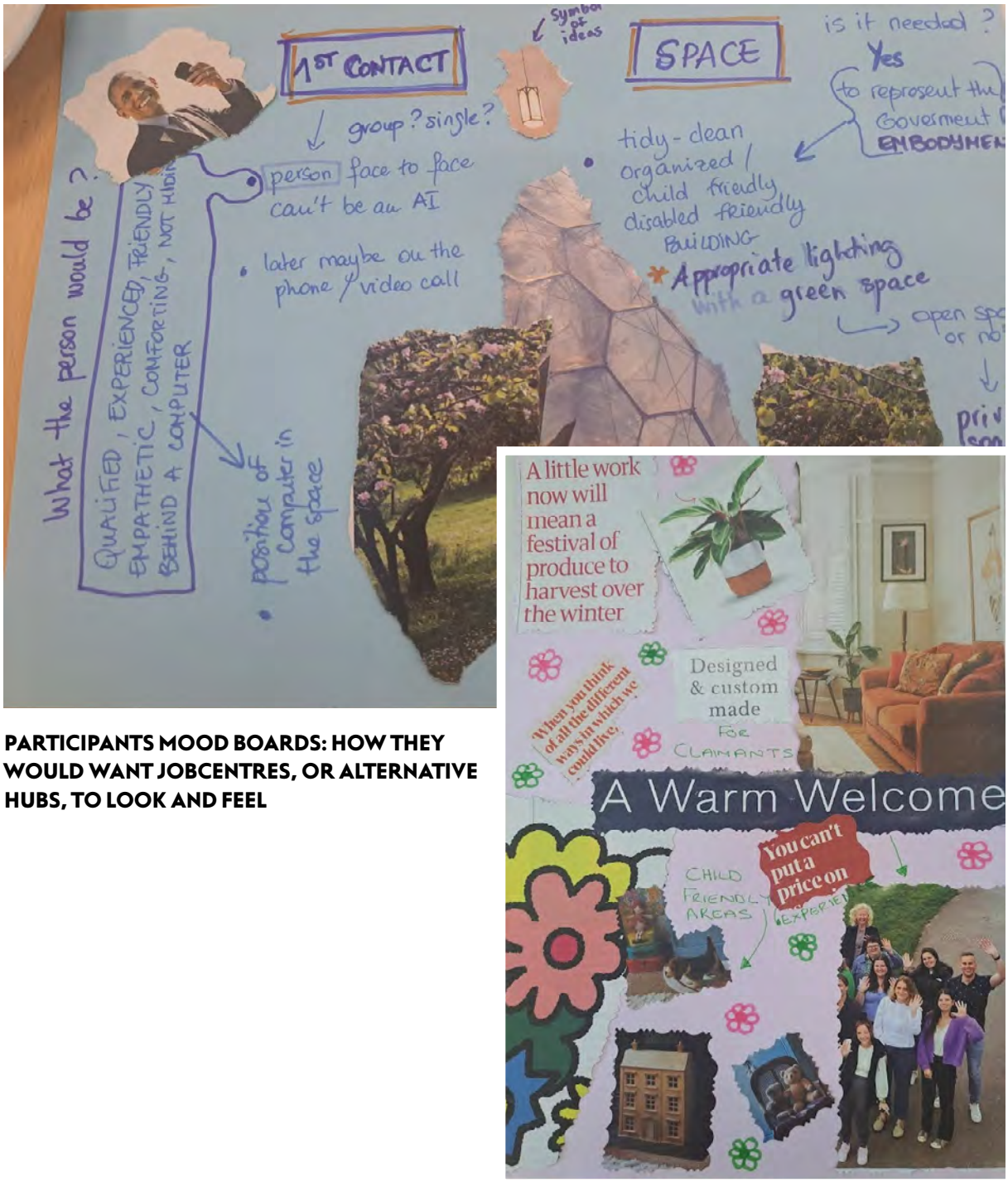
**An environment conducive to good support**
Participants talked about wanting a reformed or alternative Jobcentre-type space and service to feel modern, welcoming, accessible, and comfortable, with private spaces to talk when needed. Many also wanted a greater emphasis on providing information and advice; being a source of support around skills, retraining, and self-employment; and being somewhere that people would want to go to meet others for peer support or use as a co-working space, with facilities and support to enable all of this.

There was a clear sense that specific attention needed to be given to the messages and power dynamics implied by the look, feel, and set up of the physical space and the way it is used – what has been termed "institutional body language".[24]

Participants suggested that the environment should be less clinical and less adversarial and that spaces should not be set up in a way that confers so much authority on the work coach and so little power on those receiving support.

One tangible but symbolically important shift in this dynamic that was mentioned on a couple of occasions was the simple idea of being offered a cup of tea at appointments. Many participants suggested a more fundamental overhaul was needed, however, with Jobcentre functions being delivered instead in trusted community services and locations.

In one of the workshops, participants created mood boards for how they would want Jobcentres, or alternative hubs, to look and feel to create the best possible first impression and facilitate a positive initial interaction with a work coach. The themes and ideas from these are reflected in the summary above, but some examples are also included below:




**PARTICIPANTS MOOD BOARDS: HOW THEY WOULD WANT JOBCENTRES, OR ALTERNATIVE HUBS, TO LOOK AND FEEL**

**An effective and collaborative work coach relationship**

There was unanimous support for the idea of having a core point of contact at the Jobcentre or equivalent service and a strong focus on building this relationship through consistent contact. Participants generally supported the idea of this point of contact performing a coaching role, in terms of trying to motive and guide people, but there was also a desire for a greater focus on advice and support around careers and skills.

Participants wanted work coaches to show more trust in people, assume the best of them, and try to tap into their existing motivation and ambitions. They wanted there to be a focus on fostering people's wellbeing, self-esteem, confidence, and motivation, alongside more practical discussions and tasks. Many participants suggested work coaches needed to be trained and skilled in things like active listening, showing empathy and interest, and communicating clearly and effectively.

Participants wanted to feel that work coaches were taking an active interest in them and proactively trying to support them, rather than expecting them to make all the effort and take all the responsibility. Linked to this was the idea that, as with the Jobcentre environment, proactive steps should be taken to correct for what has historically been a very one-sided balance of power in the relationship between work coaches and the people they support.

Many participants suggested that work coaches with specific skills and experience around things like disability or caring responsibilities should be assigned where required. They also felt that attempts should be made to ensure the work coach was a good fit for the person being supported, including considering someone's characteristics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity. Some participants suggested that additional members of staff should be available to support on specific subjects such as self-employment, retraining, or in-work progression.

There was agreement that Jobcentres and their staff should be much more plugged into the local area and economy, with more proactive links to local employers and other local services that could support people around work and other issues they are facing. This reaffirmed the sense from some participants, expressed in other parts of the workshops, that employment support should be more locally designed and delivered, with alternative services and locations replacing current Jobcentres.

**A jointly produced and agreed plan of support**

It was widely agreed that a jointly produced and agreed plan of support was critical and that the current claimant commitment approach completely failed to fulfil this.

Participants felt that the initial interactions with a work coach were a key opportunity for them to communicate their current circumstances, discuss what sort of work they might want to do, and explore what support might be needed to help them achieve these ambitions. As well as discussing previous work experiences, the work coach should explore the person's skills, interests, and ambitions. This was seen as important not only to establish a plan of support but also to build rapport and trust. Some participants suggested this could be better achieved in a non-Jobcentre location (such as someone's home or a community space) where they might feel more comfortable and at ease.

Participants also wanted an initial discussion to consider their wider circumstances, beyond just a focus on work, so that the work coach could understand the barriers they may face and identify any other support the person may need around issues such as housing or health.

Across both workshops, skills, training, and career development came up frequently. There was a strong feeling that there needed to be more of a careers advice aspect to the work coach role so that they could help people understand what roles might be a good fit for their skills, interests, and experience and what the pathways into these roles might entail. Participants wanted a wide range of options for support, both within and beyond the Jobcentre, so that they could be helped by their work coach to piece together a personalised and appropriate support plan. They suggested that this could include things like job trials and work experience so that people could be supported to build a better understanding of what sort of jobs might be a good fit for them.

In terms of the plan itself, participants wanted it to be a live document that could grow and change over time, rather than something fixed. They


spoke about how they wanted support that would set bold ambitions for them but that this was very different from setting strict and prescriptive conditions. The plan should be the basis of a mutually agreed relationship. While participants were comfortable with this plan placing expectations on both sides of that relationship, this didn't need to take the form of narrow requirements such as the number of hours per week spent looking for work. There was agreement that objectives and plans that people felt ownership over and bought into would elicit much more active and genuine engagement.

The nature of the relationship and the onus of responsibility implied by the term 'claimant commitment', and the participants' experiences of having this commitment essentially imposed on them, was completely antithetical to the type of process and agreement they said they wanted and would most benefit from. The balance of power, responsibility, and trust were all seen as critical factors in determining whether the relationship with a work coach would provide effective support.

**Shared responsibility to maintain engagement**

Participants wanted the sense of shared responsibility for developing and agreeing a support plan extended to how engagement with support is maintained on an ongoing basis. They agreed that there should be a broad expectation that people try to engage with support. However, they suggested that where this wasn't happening it would often be because of mitigating circumstances. This was likely to be related to barriers such as health or caring responsibilities but could also be because of the nature of support on offer and a failure of work coaches and Jobcentres to foster genuine engagement.

How the relationship was maintained was seen as key by participants. Current appointments – lasting around ten minutes and largely focused on checking whether people were meeting their claimant commitment – were seen as detrimental and disempowering. Outside of these appointments, communication was often conducted via the online universal credit journal, but participants saw this as very one-sided and process driven.

Participants suggested they would want to have longer appointments with their work coach if the interaction felt more collaborative and supportive. They wanted it to be focused on how they were doing and the progress they were making, rather than simply whether they were ticking the right boxes by meeting prescriptive requirements. They wanted more choice and control over when, how often, and even where they met with their work coach. This would not only mean these appointments fit better around their needs but also that people would feel a greater sense of ownership and that they were being trusted and respected. Participants suggested this would lead to better outcomes, not least among them a reduced risk of sanctions due to missed appointments.

Between appointments, participants were keen for better ongoing communication by phone, text, or online, depending on individual preferences. They wanted an online platform that felt more accessible and supportive and of more use to them, rather than feeling like it was primarily to monitor their compliance with conditionality. They suggested that having a work coach touch base more often, whether to provide new information or just to check in, would make people feel better supported.

There was widespread agreement that there should be clearer expectations about how work coaches should be supporting people, and a greater onus on them to provide a good quality service. Participants wanted to feel they had a right to good support rather than feeling a constant sense of "owing" something to DWP and the Jobcentre. They wanted the opportunity to provide feedback on their work coach and the support on offer, and for there to be accountability if they weren't getting the help they needed. This feedback should be received constructively and should never negatively prejudice the way that someone is treated in future.

**A measured response when things aren't working out**

In contrast to the current approach, where the application of conditionality and the tacit or explicit threat of sanctions is front and centre in people's interactions with their work coach, participants wanted a more graded and proportionate response to any breakdown of engagement. Some participants questioned whether the threat of sanctions could co-exist with a trusting and supportive, and therefore effective, work coach relationship. There was a broad consensus, however, that there should be some expectations placed on those receiving support and some process for responding where people were not seen to be meeting these expectations.

Many participants agreed that there should be an initial window of time (views ranged from one to six months) when the threat of sanctions shouldn't even be on the table and the focus should be entirely on building a positive relationship with a work coach. If someone was not engaging with support during this period, the starting assumption should be that something needed to change about the way support was being offered and provided, rather than that the person was acting in bad faith. The work coach should proactively reach out to the person and try to establish why they had not been engaging and what changes or additional support may help them to do so.

Participants suggested that individuals should be encouraged to report any issues experienced with the quality of support on offer to a Jobcentre manager. They should also have the opportunity to change their work coach or even the Jobcentre they are attending if they believe that may help them to engage. Another suggestion was to hold a joint meeting with the work coach and a third party to try to resolve any issues. Many participants flagged that difficulty engaging with support was often down to things like caring responsibilities or health conditions, with mental health highlighted in particular. They agreed that such barriers should never lead to someone being punished.

Participants felt there should be plenty of warning of a shift to a more prescriptive application of conditionality, with multiple stages before sanctions were ever resorted to. If sanctions were ever applied, participants felt they should be much more limited in severity and duration than those currently used and should never leave someone unable to afford the essentials. It was also suggested that sanctions should be reimbursed once someone reengaged with support or if it emerged that their disengagement was due to additional barriers such as poor health.

# THE PROVIDER PERSPECTIVE

We wanted to sense-check the emerging findings and recommendations from our deliberative workshops with organisations involved in delivering employment support in both locations. This was to see if what we had heard chimed with their experiences, whether our ideas for reform sounded effective and workable, and if there was anything important missing. We organised a roundtable discussion, with ten participating organisations:

- North Manchester Community Partnership
- Good Work Camden
- KX Recruit
- Central London Forward
- Manchester City Council
- Somers Town Community Association
- Pathways Community Interest Company
- The Growth Company
- Ingeus
- Hillside Clubhouse

These organisations have first-hand experience in designing and delivering employment support, particularly for those facing greater barriers to work. Some attendees had experience of delivering DWP-commissioned contracts and all had experience of interacting with Jobcentres and supporting people in contact with DWP systems and services.

## REFLECTIONS ON DELIBERATIVE WORKSHOP FINDINGS

We presented the key insights from the deliberative workshops, with a particular focus on participants' previous experiences of Jobcentres, work coaches, and conditionality. In response, the roundtable attendees reported that they were not surprised by what they heard and that it was generally consistent with their experiences and perspectives:

> "The DWP benefits system is set up for the small percentage of people who are playing the system and basically bundles everyone into that mistrust from day one."

> "Jobcentres aren't job centres. They're just benefits tick boxes. It's not to do with jobs anymore."

> "The tension you mentioned between the dual role of a Jobcentre, which is part offering support and part behaviour monitoring - I think that's what leads to a general suspicion that people have when dealing with the Jobcentre."

We asked attendees how people's experiences and perceptions of DWP impacted their ability as providers to engage with and support them. Some attendees spoke about negative experiences of people being referred to them directly from DWP:

> "Broadly speaking and this doesn't apply to everyone, but there are definitely negative connotations when it comes to referrals through DWP."

> "We spend a lot of time and effort stressing that we're not the Jobcentre. Towards the end of our programmes, because they are timed, a lot of the communication is 'Let's try and help you so you don't have to go back to the Jobcentre.'."

Others reported having to do a lot of work to convince people they were different and disconnected from DWP, to overcome the existing perceptions and expectations people held:

> "One of the first things we do when someone comes to us is explain that we do not work for DWP – 'You are not mandated to go to any of the interviews that we arrange, and we want to help you find a job that you actually want to do.' As soon as we say that they relax."

> "People have a perception that our job is to get them into the next available job, or that we want to try to get people back to work straight away, which people are really fearful of."

Many attendees reported that they had good relationships with their local Jobcentres but that the systems that staff had to operate within, and the reputation of Jobcentres among people they were

meant to be supporting, outweighed any individual effort:

> "Our [local] Jobcentres are fabulous and the best I've worked with in 20 years…but the negativity we get back from customers at having to touch the Jobcentre is a real problem for us."

Most attendees suggested that, even if they had been part of schemes involving a degree of mandation in the past, they now only wanted to be involved in voluntary engagement. This was often about the values and principles of the provider, but also a belief that conditionality simply wasn't an effective way to engage with and support people:

> "As you mandate someone, you're forcing them to do something. You're never going to get them to really engage, are you?"

> "Most of [the people we support] have low literacy skills, low digital literacy skills. So they're miles away from the jobs market. So all these conditions that are put on to them they're not going to achieve them because they're just miles away."

> "For a month, we did a trial where we [worked] in accordance with DWP conditionality for everyone in [area A] and no one in [area B]. Engagement and job entry performance was better in [area B] during that period."

**Their ideas for reform**

Before sharing our proposals for a more flexible approach to conditionality, we asked attendees how they would like to see the current system reformed. In particular, we prompted on how they would grapple with the challenge of balancing the downsides of conditionality against political and public demand for some mechanism of accountability for people receiving benefits:

> "It would be better if it was voluntary engagement… give people the trust that they deserve for the first few months."

> "My personal preference would be voluntary, but there will be an argument that there needs to be an element of conditionality for people who are 'playing the benefits system'… so perhaps there's a six-month marker… and after that period of time, you go into some kind of conditionality regime."

> "I do also think that there does need to be an element of, whether it be sanctions or whatever it is, if there isn't over a set period of time any genuine active steps towards going back into employment. How do you measure that – I don't know."

There were some echoes of the deliberative workshops around separating the work coach role from enforcement of rules and conditions, ensuring any use of conditionality takes account of additional barriers people may be facing, and having a greater focus on people's ambitions rather than pushing them towards any job going:

> "You're probably always going to have some element of conditionality, but should that be the same agency that is trying to support you that is doing that as well? So kind of separating out the roles and responsibilities of the Jobcentre."

> "We're seeing the focus move more towards those with disabilities, health issues… Any conditionality for those groups is likely to have a really negative impact on their already fragile health."

> "There needs to be a bit more of that element of careers advice and guidance within the Jobcentre and actually listening to what people are actually looking for… not pushing them into jobs that they're just not interested in because immediately you're not going to have that engagement."

One suggestion, that was met with positivity from others, was to introduce more of a sense of customer choice to employment support, to give people more control and autonomy:

> "Whatever the provision, it needs to be more holistic, adaptive, and self-directed. It would be better if there was a suite of different provisions or services that somebody could go and choose which they felt would be most beneficial for them rather than being assigned or referred to something."

**Their response to our proposals**

We presented attendees with a proposal for a more flexible approach to conditionality, where the initial focus would be on fostering voluntary engagement. More prescriptive requirements would only be considered where no engagement occurred, in a similar way to how performance management may be gradually introduced in a workplace for an employee failing to meet expectations (this proposal is set out in more detail in the recommendations section). There was a unanimous response that this would be a positive step forward from how things currently operate:

> "It's a no-brainer for me… I think treating people like the grown-up adults we would all like to be treated as, should we experience some kind of misfortune or health condition, is a good place to start."

> "That example you gave of treating it like performance management – that really works as a concept."

> "[That initial focus on engagement] is very much the way that we do things here."

One attendee suggested it could be particularly effective for making employment support more accessible to people facing additional barriers to employment:

> "Evidence would suggest quite a lot of people are parking themselves on a disability-based benefit and can't find a way out because they're scared of the conditionality regime."

Attendees felt the greater focus within our proposals on building a trusting relationship of support was a good fit for a more devolved approach led by local organisations:

> "I think devolving, and some of that relationship being fostered by organisations like ours and undoubtedly others in this room, would be a good starting point."

Some, however, remained concerned about any formal involvement in a system that still ultimately had recourse to apply some kind of sanction to the sort of people they supported:

> "I would be concerned about decades of really bad optics for Jobcentres before I would be willing as an organisation to enter any kind of partnership which could potentially end up with that conversation [about sanctions] at the end of the process."

> "We always say to people this will be at their pace. I would feel worried about our organisation being involved with anything that forces us to compromise that approach."

# THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

The current approach to conditionality is often justified, and indeed framed as necessary, by politicians on the basis of perceived public demands. General support for the underlying principle of accountability, however, does not necessarily equate to people understanding and approving of, let alone demanding, the current approach to applying conditionality.

We wanted to dig beneath the surface of headline public support to better understand how people think conditionality is used and why they think it is important, as well as to gauge their receptiveness to critiques of the current approach. We also wanted to explore whether there is potential to build consent and support for an alternative approach that better reflects the needs and preferences expressed in our deliberative workshops by those with experience of the current system.

We ran focus groups to gain some initial insights into people's current perceptions of conditionality and test how different critiques may land. These informed subsequent national polling to gain a more representative understanding of public understanding and opinions.

## FOCUS GROUPS

We commissioned Opinium to recruit and facilitate two focus groups, split by gender with a mixed sample in terms of location, age, ethnicity, and political affiliation. We screened out people with low incomes, household members on benefits, or strong existing views on benefits, to see how an audience without clear preconceptions might respond to our findings and proposals (fuller details of the recruitment process and participant demographics are included in Annexe 2).

### Initial views on conditionality, Jobcentres, and work coaches

Participants were given an initial prompt of slides that explained in brief what conditionality means and how it is applied through someone's interaction with the Jobcentre and their work coach. They were asked for their response to these prompts.

Some participants seemed very comfortable with the idea of conditionality and suggested it was necessary to protect public finances:

> "The conditionality, the expectations – it's fine. It's taxpayers' money." **Female, 45–54, North West**

> "We must have that. Otherwise, we're going to end up with people on benefits for years." **Male, 45–54, East of England**

There was some surprise about the extent of requirements people are often subject to:

> "If somebody spends, let's say, two weeks doing 35 hours a week [of work search], I think you're going kind of hit the market in the third week. How many more jobs are there going to be to apply for?" **Female, 45–54, North West**

> "If your benefit would be sanctioned by not taking any job you are offered, that seems very, very harsh to me." **Male, 35–44, South East**

> "I have a bit of a problem with applying for any jobs your adviser suggests. I don't really think anybody wants to be surviving purely on these really low benefits. I think people want to get jobs. Forcing them into things that are not right isn't that helpful." **Female, 25–34, Scotland**

Although all participants expressed support for the idea that there should be expectations placed on people receiving benefits, most also suggested that these expectations and how they are applied need to reflect people's personal circumstances and should be matched by good-quality support from Jobcentres and work coaches:

> "I think it's fine to set conditions that people are actively trying to get into work, but there could be a reason why they're not in work in the first place, and that could be down to skills, experience, and knowledge. And I think that conditionality has to go hand in hand with training programmes and support. Give people skills, knowledge and capability to work in the work environment." **Male, 55–64, Scotland**

> "If someone needs extra support because of extra difficulties, they should be provided that as part of the Jobcentre service. Otherwise, you're just setting up people to fail." **Female, 45–54, North West**

> "I think if things were improved to provide that contract, that process, accountability on both parts, a work coach or mentor and a job seeker, that you could still have that conditionality, but it could be implemented in a way that was much more supportive and very clear to the help seeker how it's going to be applied." **Male, 45–54, East of England**

However, many participants didn't believe that this was happening in practice and felt that conditionality was more about policing the benefits system than helping people into work:

> "I feel like it's one system fits all." **Female, 45–54 North West**

> "[Conditionality is] more of a checks and balance system for the government, the benefits system, than an authentic means by which people can get decent work and enjoyable work and work that they're qualified to do." **Male, 45–54, East of England**

> "Do Jobcentres still help to get a job these days? What is their function above and beyond just making sure you get your benefits on time? Do they have a function?" **Male, 55–64, North West**

In particular, there was a lot of scepticism about the ability of work coaches to provide effective and personalised support within the context of how Jobcentres and the benefits system operate:

> "They should be there to give you all the support that they can to get into employment. But they probably just see it as more of a tick-box exercise." **Female, 45–54, North West**

> "Work coaches have their own jobs to do, which is getting through their claimants and making sure they turn up to appointments. For the work coach, the coaching part isn't actually an integral part of their job." **Female, 45–54, North West**

> "If they only have twenty minutes per person once a week, even if they have all the skills in the world, that's only going to get that person so far…is there really just time for that tick box exercise and then that's all that's happening?" **Female, 25–34, London**

**The impact of conditionality on the quality of job outcomes**

Participants were shown a prompt slide putting forward the argument that a strict and prescriptive approach to conditionality is likely to push people into poorer-quality jobs that are less suited to their skills and experience. They were then asked for their response to this critique.

Most participants seemed very receptive to this line of argument and it resonated with some existing perceptions of how Jobcentres and the benefits system operate:

> "You're basically concentrating on getting someone off benefits at any cost and getting them into any paid employment so you can wash your hands of the responsibility of looking after them in a time when they're in need." **Male, 45–54, East of England**

There was particular concern about the idea that people would be pushed into jobs that were not a good fit for them and that they would then be more likely to fall out of work again:

> "You might have to take any job, but you might hate it. And, therefore, not really be motivated to do a very good job and not stay in that job very long. And then you're back on benefits again and back in the same position as you were." **Female, 45–54, North West**

> "Well, it's like catch-22, isn't it? Because, basically, if you push people into a job that they don't want they're overqualified today and they leave that job." **Female, 55–64, South East**

> "They're more likely to fall out of work again. If somebody's in a job that they've been forced into and they're not happy, then they're not going to stick it." **Male, 45–54, London**

Concerns were also expressed about how people would be affected personally by being pushed into an unsuitable or poor-quality job:

> "You do a lot of harm to someone by forcing them into a job [that's not] under their terms. You're removing some of their ability to seek a job they would enjoy and thrive at." **Male, 45–54, East of England**

> "To state the bleeding obvious, if you don't enjoy your job, you're not going to stick at it. You're going to resent it, and that's going to cause you issues." **Male, 45–54, Yorkshire and Humberside**

It was also pointed out by one participant that this approach could also be unhelpful to employers:

> "If you take somebody on and they're only short term and they leave after a period of months, there's a cost to the employer that they've put into giving support and training for that new entrant." **Male, 55–64, Scotland**

One participant did suggest that there may be some value in getting someone into any job as this may provide a springboard for finding another job they like more (reflecting the DWP's ABC mantra of 'Any job first, a Better job next, and into a Career'):

> "If they start a job that they don't like, this could be an ambition to work more and search for other jobs while they are in the job. This could be something to motivate them to look for something else. Depends on the person." **Female, 45–54, South East**

**The impact of conditionality on the work coach relationship**

The next prompt slide put forward the argument that people needed to have a trusting relationship with their work coach to be well supported to overcome barriers and return to work, and that strict and prescriptive conditionality undermined the quality of that relationship.

Many participants acknowledged the tension that could be caused by a work coach being the person offering support but also enforcing conditionality and potentially sanctioning benefits. In particular, participants highlighted the impact it would have on trust, which they agree was vital:

> "I'd like to think that [the work coach is] on my behalf. If [they're] giving me sanctions on my benefits, I think it causes a bit of a barrier." **Male, 55–64, North West**

> "To have someone support you properly, they need to understand you, and you need to be able to communicate freely with them and really be able to open up about your concerns and maybe things that might embarrass you but do affect your getting a job. But then if they turn around and say 'Well, I'm going to take some money away from you', that trust is a bit lost." **Female, 25–34, London**

> "[The work coach] has to invest in the person looking for work…[someone] has to trust their work coach – that what they are doing is for their benefit. And the work coach has got to trust the individual as well – that they are actually doing what they say they're doing." **Male, 45–54, London**

Linked to this, one participant talked about how someone struggling with their motivation and confidence would benefit more from support and encouragement from their work coach rather than the pressure of having to meet fixed requirements under the threat of sanctions:

> "[A key part of the role is to] build confidence and help them stay motivated. If you've been unsuccessful over time applying for jobs, it's natural, your confidence will dip. Your motivation to continue to apply for jobs will start to diminish. And just having someone to put their arm around you, give you reassurance, confidence, and encourage you, can be a fantastic boost to help people energise and keep their desire to keep moving forward." **Male, 55–64, Scotland**

Within one group, there was a discussion about whether the two roles work coaches currently perform needed to be split, with one person providing support and someone else enforcing the rules around what people are expected to do to retain their benefits:

> "In order to help build that relationship, the sole goal [should be] to do just that and support the person seeking work. And that if there is a need…of making sure that those conditions are met, and enforcing that, then that should be the job of somebody else so that it doesn't undermine the relationship with the person who's trying to build the confidence and help the person seek a job." **Male, 45–54, East of England**

> "[Conditionality] causes a bit of a barrier…It's two separate job roles. One as a person who deals with assisting me into a job as quickly as possible, and maybe somebody else who just deals with the benefits and making sure that I'm keeping myself in line." **Male, 55–64, North West**

In the other group, a debate emerged about the impact of the power imbalance between work coaches and people on benefits created and enforced through conditionality, with some expressing concern that it went too far or was just incompatible with an effective relationship of support:

> "The work coach, for example, choosing jobs that you have to apply for, I don't think they should just have free rein to make up whatever they want, say you must attend this one specific training or something like that. I think that's too much power." **Female, 25–34, Scotland**

> "How good a trust can there be or how good a relationship can there be when there is such a power imbalance?" **Female, 45–54, North West**

Others, however, suggested that this power imbalance was comparable to that which exists between employees and employers and was therefore appropriate and didn't preclude the possibility of trust:

> "The work coach relationship is not that dissimilar to an employer-employee relationship, which is what you're going to be going into when you're looking for a job. So I think it's fair that there is a power imbalance." **Female, 25–34, Scotland**

> "I would argue that in any kind of job with an employer, there's some sort of power imbalance. You have to set goals in most jobs, and achieve things in most jobs. It doesn't necessarily mean that you can't trust." **Female, 25–34, London**

**Taking a more flexible approach to conditionality**

The participants were shown a prompt slide setting out a proposal for a more flexible approach to conditionality, where there would be an initial period with no threat of sanctions. The focus during this period would be on trying to build a trusting and effective relationship of support. If someone wasn't engaging by the end of this period, then more prescriptive conditions could be set (this proposal is set out in more detail in the recommendations section).

Although some concerns were expressed about the possibility of people 'getting away' with not trying to return to work during this initial period, most participants could see the value of trying to open up the possibility of more genuine engagement at the start of the relationship:

> "That makes sense…there might be various reasons why someone's out of work, and it might be stressful for them. This is just an initial period where they're able to say 'Okay, what are we going to do here? How are we going to approach this? You know, what do you want? What skills do you have?' It's hard, I think, especially if you've been in a particular job for a long time, knowing what your transferable skills are." **Female, 45–54, North West**

> "Building the trust first, working together. And then if the person doesn't show interest, there's going to be consequences." **Female, 45–54, North West**

> "I think once you get people to buy into that whole journey, you get more out of it. But people have got to know what they're going to get at the end of it for them to join that journey." **Male, 55–64, Scotland**

Interestingly, given the discussions in the other group about the similarities between the power imbalance in Jobcentres and that in most workplaces, one participant pointed out that this proposed approach more closely resembled how good performance management operates (a similarity we hadn't pointed out explicitly):

> "It reads to me like a corporate approach within an institution or a company that they might take to deal with underperformance, where you start with the first point about engaging, finding out requirements, not threatening, maybe offering support and training." **Male, 45–54, East of England**

This echoed the views of other participants that the use of conditionality should be responsive to the circumstances of the individual and the extent to which they were engaging with support:

> "There possibly should be more requirements for that person [not engaging] than someone who has been trying, you know, as much as they can – engaging, doing extra training, whatever volunteer work, but still hasn't found a job. They're completely different, aren't they? And one, I think, should be treated differently to the other." **Female, 45–54, North West**

There was some debate about the appropriate length of any initial period where the focus would be on trying to foster positive voluntary engagement before more prescriptive conditionality might be considered if things are not working out. The consensus landed around one to three months, with some participants suggesting a longer period of up to six months:

> "[There should be] a period where you assess what you want to apply for without being forced to attend interviews that someone else has chosen for you and things like that. But I think about three months would be a good initial period, personally." **Female, 25–34, Scotland**

> "A maximum of six months is a good initial period of time." **Female, 55–64, South East**

> "I do think that if people aren't engaging in the first month, they're probably not going to engage [at all]." **Female, 25–34, London**

Something particularly noticeable across the discussions around conditionality was that participants responded differently depending on whether the focus was on support and positive outcomes or benefits receipt and the risk of people acting in bad faith. These two framings prompted quite distinct values, examples, and assumptions for participants.

**What sort of support Jobcentres should be providing**

Finally, the participants were asked about what they would want from an effective and supportive Jobcentre service. Perhaps reflecting the working status and income we had sampled for, participants did not generally see Jobcentres as somewhere they would go if they were unemployed:

> "If I was unemployed today, I wouldn't go to a Jobcentre…I would just go into voluntary work to get experience." **Female, 25–34, London**

> "I feel like [conditionality] is a lot better suited to people with lower skills than highly skilled people. I just don't believe that Jobcentre would understand the roles that more highly skilled people are going to be going into – they are likely to be able to offer more to lower-skilled [people]." **Female, 25–34, Scotland**

Reflecting what we had heard in the deliberative workshops and our roundtable discussion with employment support providers, participants suggested work coaches should be more focused on matching people with appropriate local jobs and supporting them to apply rather than just pushing people to undertake job search activities themselves:

> "[work coaches should know about] the local employment environment and local businesses…you need a very good set of skills to be a good work coach." **Male, 45–54, East of England**

> "They could also have a recruitment experience. Recruitment is a very specialised skill." **Male, 35–44, South East**

> "[work coaches] getting involved [with the job application] rather than telling them to go home and have a look at the computer." **Female, 55–64, South East**

Linked to this, participants felt work coaches should be doing more to personalise support around people's ambitions, skills, and experience, and also identifying wider needs to be addressed:

> "Find out what drives them, find out what skills they've got…they may have worked in a particular industry, but the skills that they've got, are there other alternatives that they could work in that they maybe hadn't thought of?" **Male, 45–54, London**

> "Maybe they do need some therapy. Maybe they do need counselling. Maybe they need support, and that needs to be discovered." **Male, 45–54, East of England**

Echoing a similar idea that came up in the deliberative workshops, some participants suggested work coaches should be assigned to people based on whether they were a good match:

"It really makes sense to have a work coach that sort of specialises almost in a certain type of job seeker so that they can give them the best advice for them." **Female, 45–55, North West**

"If you're pairing them up with the right sort of coach, hopefully, you may have better outputs." **Female, 25–34, London**

## POLLING

Building on the insights from the focus groups, we commissioned polling from Opinium to explore how a broader public audience understands and feels about conditionality, and how responsive they might be to arguments for a more flexible approach. They carried out an online survey of 2,041 UK adults aged 18+ from 1 to 3 May 2024. Results have been weighted to be politically and nationally representative by gender, age, and education interlocked; region; working status; ethnicity; 2019 past vote; 2016 EU referendum vote; and political attention level.

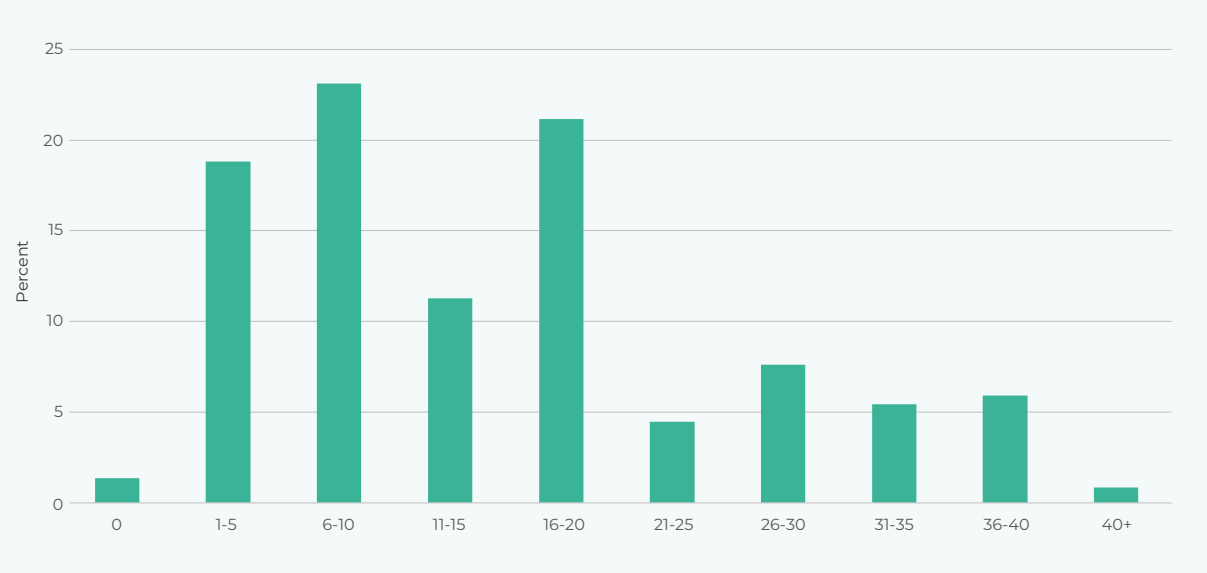
We wanted to gauge whether the public has an accurate understanding of how strict and prescriptive the current approach to conditionality is. We provided an explainer about how people are split into different groups on universal credit based on how their circumstances impact their ability to seek and maintain work and are subject to conditions based on this categorisation.

We asked how many hours per week respondents thought someone would typically be expected to spend seeking work if they weren't seen to be facing barriers to doing so. As Figure 1 shows, 76% of respondents thought that people were typically required to spend less than 21 hours per week looking for work – the median estimate was 13 hours per week. In reality, people not seen to be facing additional barriers are typically expected to spend 35 hours per week seeking work.

We found a similar picture when it came to respondents' estimates of how long people are allowed to spend looking for jobs in a 'preferred field' before they are required to apply for any jobs suggested by the work coach. As Figure 2 shows, fewer than 25% of respondents thought people were allowed just one month, which is the true amount, or less – the median estimate was three months.

**FIGURE 1: PUBLIC ESTIMATES OF TYPICAL MANDATED HOURS OF WORK SEARCH**

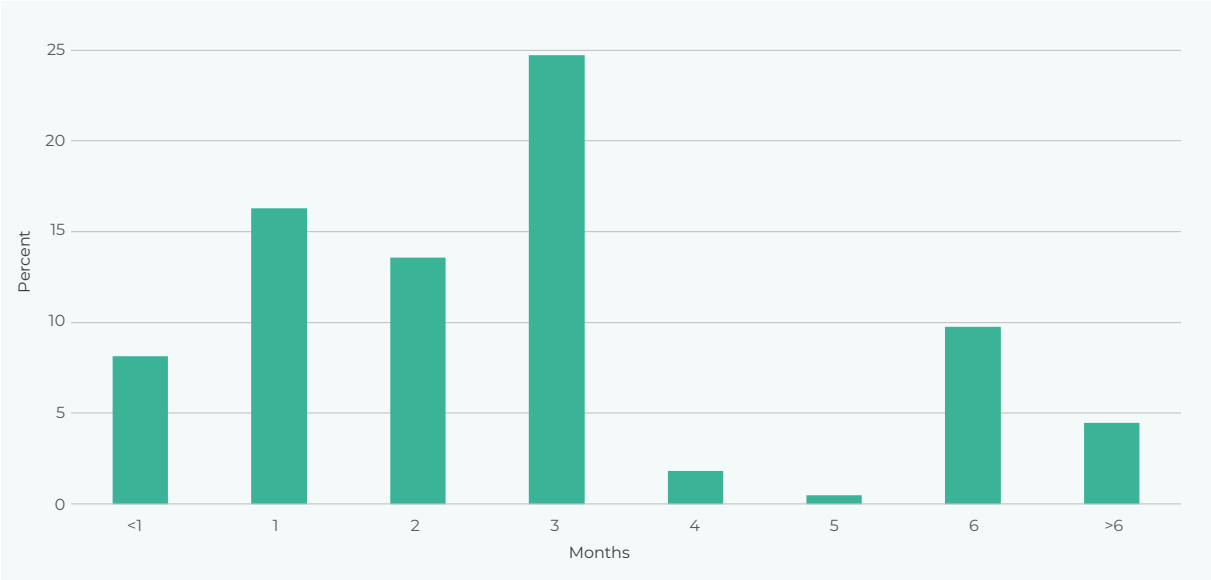
Question: For people not seen to be facing additional barriers, how many hours a week do you think they are typically required to spend looking for work?




Source: Opinium polling (weighted base of 1897 after 'don't know' responses were excluded)

**FIGURE 2: PUBLIC ESTIMATES OF TIME ALLOWED TO FOCUS ON PREFERRED JOBS**

Question: How long do you think someone not seen to be facing additional barriers is allowed to spend looking for jobs that are a good fit for their skills and experience before they are required to look for any available jobs?




Source: Opinium polling (471 'don't know' responses not included on graph)

In both these cases, the public perception is that conditionality is much less strict and prescriptive than it is in practice. This undermines the argument that the current approach to conditionality is based on or necessitated by public appetite for strict requirements.

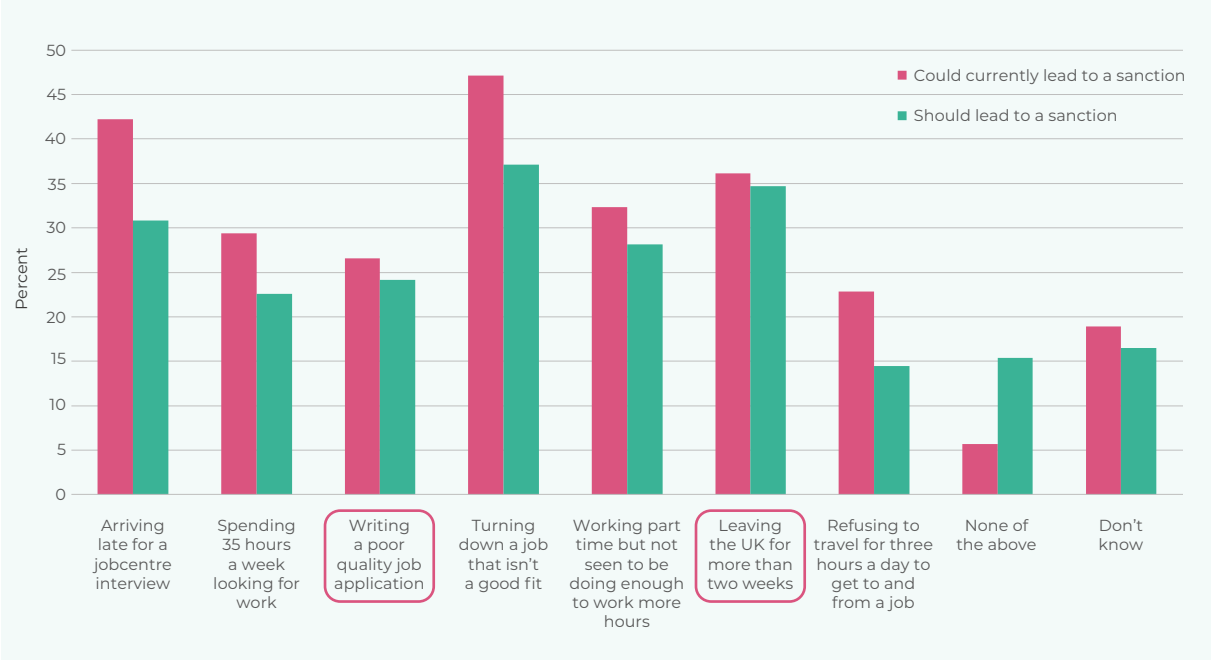
We then asked whether a range of actions related to interactions with the Jobcentre could and should lead to someone receiving a benefits sanction. Most of the actions listed can lead to a sanction but we included two that would not (boxed in red in Figure 3). However, none were identified by more than 50% of respondents as potentially leading to a sanction, and the actions that would not lead to a sanction were selected by a similar proportion of people to those that could.

This is further evidence that the public does not have a good understanding of how conditionality is currently used and tends to underestimate how strict and prescriptive it is. However, they also think it should be less strict and prescriptive than they perceive it to be. Although most respondents suggested that at least one of the actions listed should potentially lead to a sanction, none of the actions was selected by more than 37% of respondents. The number of people saying an action should lead to a sanction was always lower than the number who thought it currently could.

Next, we asked what approach Jobcentres should prioritise from pairs of competing statements. As Figure 4 shows, respondents expressed a strong preference for focusing on getting people into fairly-paid and secure jobs with progression prospects rather than just any job, and giving people more time to find jobs that are a good fit rather than rushing people into jobs. Respondents also wanted Jobcentres to focus more on offering a positive service for those who want support over enforcing sanctions against those not engaging. The closest split was a 46%–41% balance in favour of having a general requirement to engage but enforcing this flexibly, rather than setting very specific requirements that people are expected to meet.

## FIGURE 3: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT COULD AND SHOULD LEAD TO BENEFITS SANCTIONS

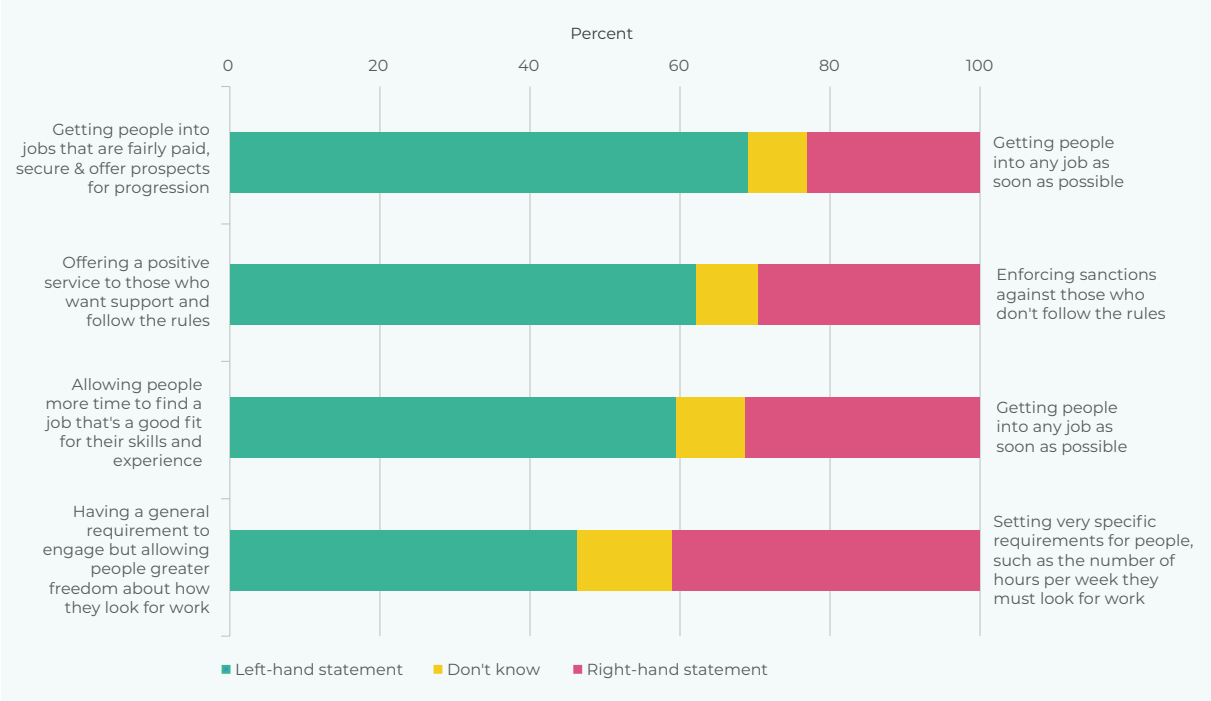
Question: Which of the following criteria do you think could/should lead to a benefits sanction?




Source: Opinium polling. Note: All criteria listed could lead to a sanction under current rules except those boxed in red.

## FIGURE 4: PUBLIC PREFERENCES FOR HOW JOBCENTRES SHOULD OPERATE

Question: Of the following, what would you want the Jobcentre to prioritise?




Source: Opinium polling

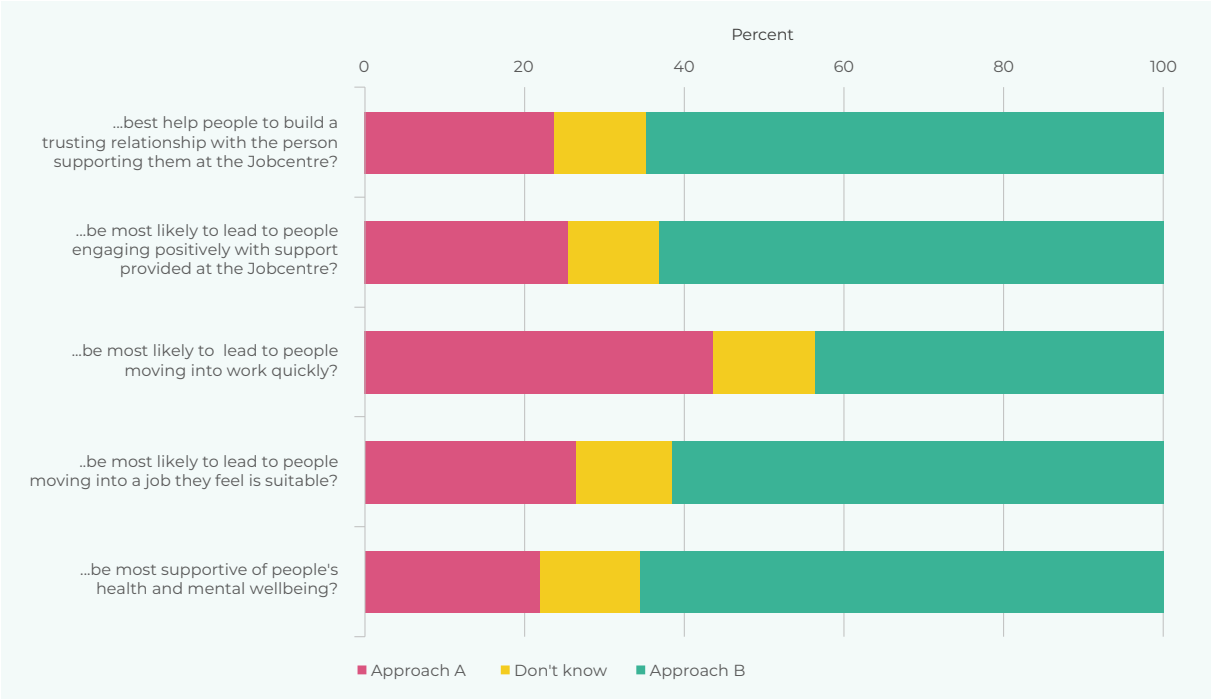
Building on this, we set out two potential approaches that Jobcentres could take to applying conditionality – the first broadly describing the current approach and the second reflecting the recommended approach we were leaning towards based on the deliberative workshops:

> **Approach A:** People are told at their first meeting with the Jobcentre that they have to meet certain commitments, such as spending a minimum number of hours a week looking for work, and that they could face benefits sanctions (ie their benefits being reduced or stopped) if they fail to do this.
>
> **Approach B:** The Jobcentre at first tries to work with someone on a voluntary basis to support them towards work, and only turns to mandatory commitments the person has to meet (and the threat of benefits sanctions) if the person is not willing to engage with support.

We asked which of these two approaches respondents thought would be more likely to produce different outcomes. For all but one of the outcomes we prompted on, there was 61%–66% support for our alternative proposal. The only outcome where views were more evenly split related to people moving back into work quickly, but even on this the current approach was not able to command majority support, with 44% of respondents backing each approach.

**FIGURE 5: PUBLIC PREFERENCES FOR HOW CONDITIONALITY IS APPLIED IN JOBCENTRES**

Question: Which approach (Approach A or B) do you think would...




Source: Opinium polling

Finally, we set out two arguments "made by some" against setting and policing strict conditions for people on universal credit for respondents to consider:

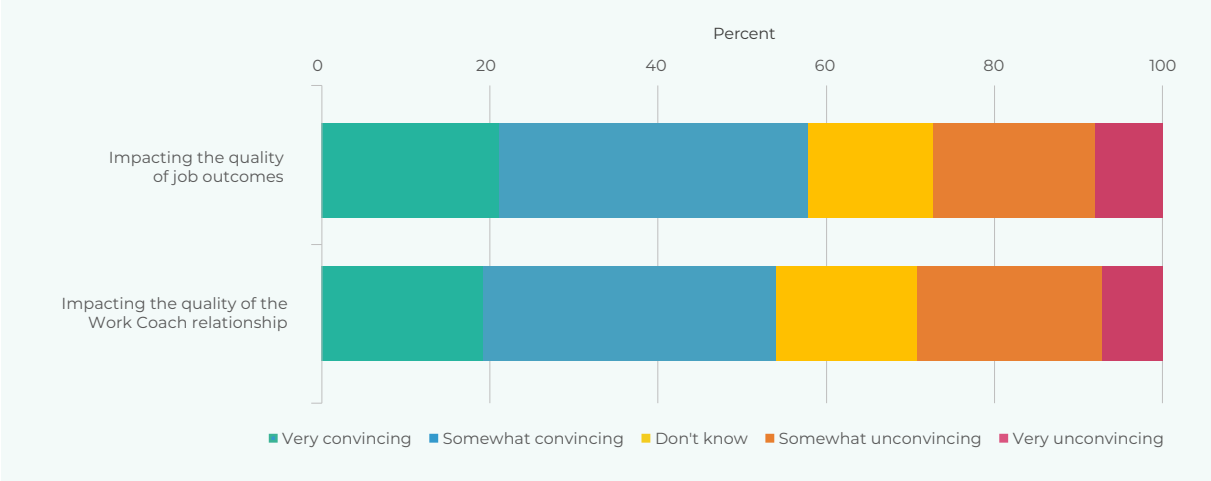
1. Strict conditions tend to push people into low-paid, insecure, poor-quality jobs, and this could cost more in the long term as they will continue to need benefits to supplement their low pay. They would argue that people pushed into such jobs may also be more likely to become unemployed again in the future.

2. Strict conditions make it hard for someone to have a trusting and supportive relationship with the person at the Jobcentre who is supposed to help them into work, which in turn means they are less likely to achieve the outcome together of a job that is a good fit for that person.

We asked respondents how convincing or unconvincing they found these as arguments for taking a more flexible approach to setting and policing conditions for people on universal credit. As set out in Figure 6, for the first argument, 58% of respondents reported finding it convincing compared to 27% who found it unconvincing. For the second argument, this balance was 54% compared to 29%.

**FIGURE 6: PUBLIC RECEPTIVENESS TO ARGUMENTS AGAINST STRICT CONDITIONALITY**

Question: To what extent do you find this convincing or unconvincing as an argument for taking a more flexible approach to setting and policing conditions for people on universal credit?




Source: Opinium polling

Taken as a whole, this polling suggests that the public:

- underestimates how strict and prescriptive the current model of conditionality is.
- already generally favours a more flexible, trusting, and supportive approach.
- is receptive to arguments that conditionality may harm experience and outcomes.
- strongly supports focusing on getting people into good jobs rather than just any job.
- can see the benefits of an approach that defaults towards voluntary engagement.

These findings resonate with the insights gained from the focus groups and, in combination, they demonstrate a clear opportunity to gain public consent and support for a more flexible and supportive approach to conditionality. The idea that the public 'demands' the current approach to applying conditionality is discredited by these findings. While the public wants there to be a degree of accountability for people receiving benefits, they do not want this to be pursued at the expense of providing effective and compassionate employment support.

These findings are particularly stark given that the public has been heavily exposed to a dominant narrative that conditionality is fair and effective. The critiques we presented to them go against the grain of this narrative but people were still receptive to them. This suggests that there is significant scope to shift public opinion further in favour of a less strict and prescriptive approach to conditionality through an alternative narrative that highlights the shortcomings of the current approach.

# A WAY FORWARD: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For too long, we have seen a cranking up of conditionality and a creeping spread of who is subject to it within our social security system, driven by a belief that it is both effective and popular. The assumption has been that ever tighter conditionality will only harm those who wilfully avoid looking for work and that the public strongly supports such an approach.

However, our research with people within the benefits system and with providers of employment support clearly suggests that the current approach of strict and prescriptive conditionality is not only ineffective but is often actively harmful to experiences and outcomes. Meanwhile, the public does not have a clear sense of how conditionality is currently used and, although they want some mechanism of accountability, they are supportive of an approach that prioritises positive support over tightly policing the rules to ensure compliance.

Using conditionality only as a backstop in our social security system, rather than as a default, would help to foster more genuine engagement with employment support, improving experiences and outcomes. It would help to shift the focus from getting people into any job to getting them into good work that offers more security, fulfilment, and opportunities for progression. Critically, it would also make employment support less risky and daunting for those with additional barriers such as health conditions and disabilities. This would need to be accompanied by extensive efforts to reassure this group that engaging with support will not open them up to the threat of sanctions.

Our research has led us to three sets of recommendations – one on reforming conditionality, one on how to talk about conditionality to build public consent and support for reform, and one on the wider reforms to employment support that our research suggested are required. We have foregrounded the recommendations on conditionality, as our deliberative workshops and discussion with employment support providers confirmed that the current approach fundamentally constrains and undermines any other attempts to improve employment support.

## REFORMING CONDITIONALITY

Our proposals are built on an acknowledgement that politicians and the public, even those on benefits, currently tend to support the idea of some mechanism of accountability in the benefits system. There is a widespread basic expectation that people who are able to work should try to do so. However, we believe that this principle should sit below two others in the hierarchy of priorities for how our social security system is designed and delivered:

- No household should be allowed to fall below a level of income that means they cannot meet their essential costs, including due to any sanctions that remain in the system, in line with the principles of our Living Income proposal.[25]

- Attempts to foster genuine engagement with employment support should take priority over a focus on enforcing compliance with benefits rules – a principle supported in our research by those in the system, providers and the public.

Our recommendations here are primarily concerned with how to manage the second of these tensions. The analogous situation we take as our template for this is how a good workplace would keep staff engaged, motivated, and performing well, and how they would manage situations where someone is not meeting expectations. A good line manager would look to create a positive relationship with someone they manage, only gradually invoking more prescriptive performance management if all reasonable attempts to do otherwise had been exhausted.

Given this analogy, it is apt that Labour has spoken of wanting DWP to be the "HR department" for their growth mission. Supporting people on universal credit the way a good HR department might support someone to perform well at work would mean establishing trust, understanding their circumstances and needs, making reasonable adjustments, investing in their skills, and fostering their intrinsic motivations rather than relying on threats and rewards to drive extrinsic motivations.

The first step towards this type of relationship would be to **end the most strict and prescriptive aspects of the current approach to conditionality, such as a specified number of hours per week of job search and the requirement to apply for and accept any job recommended by a work coach.**

The longer-term objective should be to move towards an approach that only explicitly invokes conditionality as a last resort, leaving as much space as possible for genuine engagement and a focus on getting people into good jobs rather than any job.

In a range of public service relationships, there is recourse to coercion of some description, but a good service will recognise that it is ineffective and unethical to foreground this as a threat. Mental health services are expected to do everything they can to offer voluntary support, with an emphasis on choice and control, before they ever consider detaining someone. A good social worker would not imply any intent to remove children from a family before they had made every effort to engage parents in a supportive and collaborative manner. A local authority effectively managing a tenancy would only use a threat of eviction as a last resort rather than the first response to difficulties.

Relational skills are critical to managing these tensions; there is growing recognition of the importance of shaping public services to foster a relational approach.[26,27] We set out below how this approach could be applied to the use of conditionality. **This model should be trialled with people starting on universal credit who would be subject to full conditionality** to establish whether it can be delivered by DWP and to evaluate its impact, particularly on levels of engagement and the quality of job outcomes. The details of the model should be adjusted within the trial through iterative testing and learning, rather than delivered as a rigid pilot, but this framework provide a foundation to work from:

1. Initial communications to people should highlight that there is a general expectation that they engage with support and try to make progress towards work, but that the aim will be to work together voluntarily and that this would only be reviewed if someone was refusing to engage with no apparent good cause. Work coaches should contact people to arrange a first meeting that is convenient and accessible.

2. The first meeting should be focused on people's experiences, skills, aspirations, and barriers. This should inform a genuinely co-produced and personalised plan, setting out what the person and the work coach will aim to do, how they will communicate, and how often they will meet. It should also include signposting to any required support for issues such as their health, housing, or childcare. The plan should be flexible rather than prescriptive and should leave the person with a sense of ownership. The work coach should look to constructively shape the plan based on their experience and expertise. but should lean towards trusting people to know their needs and strengths. The plan should be revisited at subsequent meetings and amended if needed but should not be seen as a set of requirements to be checked up on.

3. For an initial period, the onus of responsibility would be on work coaches to try to engage with people voluntarily. Based on our research, we recommend that this period last for three months, but this should be subject to further consultation and experimentation. During this period, work coaches should be proactively reaching out to people and seeking feedback if things don't seem to be progressing. People should also be encouraged to raise concerns if they feel they are not being well supported.

4. A work coach could only request a review of whether more prescriptive conditionality is required after this initial period, with the possible exception of a situation where someone will not even attend an initial meeting. However, they would need to evidence that they had made extensive efforts to engage with someone and that they had sought to establish whether there were mitigating circumstances and barriers. People with health conditions, disabilities, or caring responsibilities that limit their ability to seek and/or prepare for work should be exempt from any shift to more prescriptive conditionality.

5. A more senior member of staff would oversee this review process so that the only role a work coach can play in determining conditionality is to escalate a case. The review would involve seeking the views of the individual to see why they think things aren't working out. This could lead to attempts to address specific barriers or even trying a different work coach. Only where it was deemed absolutely necessary would more

prescriptive expectations be set. The person concerned would have a right to challenge this decision.

6. If someone breaks these more prescriptive conditions, a warning and then a final review should take place before a sanction is imposed. This would make sanctions an absolute last resort and should minimise their occurrence. Any sanctions should be of a sufficiently low rate and length that they do not take households below a minimum level of income that allows them to meet their essential costs. Sanctions should also be refundable if someone reengages or provides good reason for their disengagement.

This approach would shift the system away from a starting question of "How much conditionality is it reasonable to place on this person?" to one of "How can we most effectively engage with and support this person?". Pushing conditionality into the background will allow for more positive engagement with people who, in the current system, seek refuge from strict and prescriptive conditionality due to disabilities and health conditions, but also wider barriers.[28]

It would also improve the ability of the system to triage people and allocate work coach capacity accordingly. If an initial meeting suggests someone will be able to return to work relatively unaided, a work coach could simply check in again by phone after, say, a month rather than demanding an in-person meeting every two weeks. Similarly, if in-person meetings are no longer focused on monitoring compliance, there will be more time to focus on providing genuine support.[29]

However, even with better-allocated capacity, there will still be a need to **review the maximum caseloads and minimum skillsets required for work coaches to be able to effectively deliver this approach**. This should be evaluated as part of the trialling. Our proposed approach should support and encourage work coaches to operate in a more relational way and, in the initial absence of recourse to conditionality, will give much greater insight into how effectively they are doing this. They may need additional training alongside smaller caseloads, but the resource implications of this should be compared to potential savings the trialling implies from getting more people into better jobs for longer periods.[30]

A more fundamental barrier to success may be the underlying lack of trust in DWP and Jobcentres to treat people well and provide effective support. Given this, **consideration should be given to trialling this approach with a local authority or third sector comparator**, to explore whether this has a significant impact on people's engagement and outcomes.

Our proposed approach should improve engagement and outcomes for people who may otherwise end up seeking to be declared as having limited capability for work-related activity. In the longer term, it should make the prospect of engaging with support less daunting and risky for those already in this category. In the shorter term, **a separate test-and-learn approach should be instigated to explore how to foster voluntary engagement with people exempt from conditionality**. NEF will be producing a more detailed proposal for how this could be delivered.

In our research and recommendations, we have focused on people who are unemployed, but **the approach we have proposed could also be adapted and tested for in-work conditionality**.

## TALKING ABOUT CONDITIONALITY

Our public opinion work suggested that, while people generally believe there should be some mechanism of accountability in the benefits system, they do not have a detailed understanding of how conditionality is currently applied and are receptive to arguments for a more flexible approach. Although moves to roll back the strict and prescriptive way in which conditionality is currently applied may lead to some political and media accusations of being 'soft on benefits', we should be confident of the potential to ultimately build public consent and support.

There were some key lessons from our public opinion work about how to talk about reforming conditionality in a way that will be more likely to receive a positive response:

1. Keep the focus on employment support rather than receipt of benefits, and the importance of doing whatever is most effective at producing positive outcomes.

2. Talk about the importance of good work that will help people be more financially secure and stay

well, which is better for public finances. Argue that strict and prescriptive conditionality pushes people into poor-quality work.

3. Make the case that good employment support relies on trust and understanding and that these are directly undermined if someone feels the person supporting them is more focused on policing rules and threatening to cut their benefits.

4. Talk about erring on the side of engaging with people in a supportive and collaborative way, at least initially, to allow for the chance of genuine engagement, which is more likely to lead to positive outcomes.

5. Use the analogy of how a good workplace would seek to encourage and motivate an employee, and how they would respond in an incremental and supportive manner if someone was not meeting the expectations of the job.

6. Highlight that anyone could find themselves out of work and needing support, and that we would all want this to be respectful, personalised, and empowering.

The reality is that the debate around benefits and employment support has for a long time been dominated by a narrative that suggests conditionality only has negative consequences for people intentionally flouting the rules. Our research suggests that a more prominent counter-narrative around the impact of strict and prescriptive conditionality on the quality of job outcomes and work coach relationships could help to shift public opinion even further in favour of an approach that prioritises fostering genuine engagement over simply enforcing compliance.

## WIDER REFORM OF EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

Alongside a less strict and prescriptive approach to conditionality, a range of other recommendations for improving employment support emerged from our deliberative workshops. These were often backed up by what we heard in our discussion with providers and sometimes echoed in the public focus groups. While a detailed plan of reform for employment support services is beyond the scope of this report, we offer some key principles and ideas below based on what we have heard:

1. DWP-led employment support services, and the systems and processes around them, need a fundamental redesign to better foster genuine engagement. This redesign should be co-produced with people with experience of the current system, particularly those facing additional barriers to work linked to caring responsibilities, disability or poor health.

2. It is vital that the space where people are offered support around employment is welcoming, and comfortable and creates an atmosphere of collaboration and respect. It should be somewhere that people choose to go rather than being compelled to, and it should be open to all as a community hub and resource.

3. The tone, manner, and ethos of how staff and the wider system treat people really matter. Language and framing such as 'claimant commitment' create a one-sided and disempowering dynamic that undermines trust and intrinsic motivation. Bold and proactive efforts will be needed to try to restore trust and positivity to this relationship.

4. People want support that is more focused on good jobs rather than just getting any job as quickly as possible. This will require work coaches with greater expertise in careers advice, skills, and training. It could also include better matching of work coaches to people whose circumstances and aspirations are a good fit for their skillset.

5. People want employment support to feel rooted in the local area and economy where they live, with strong connections to other services they might need and local employers who could provide good jobs. Many report more positive experiences with local employment support services outside of the DWP system.

6. Given the negativity and lack of trust people feel towards Jobcentres and DWP, and the preference for engaging with local organisations where trust already exists, there is a strong case for greater devolution of the design and delivery of employment support. This could include funding following the individual to whoever is best placed to support them.

In combination with a move away from a strict and prescriptive approach to conditionality, this shift could help to repair the broken relationship between the state and people supported by benefits, opening the door for more positive and genuine engagement with employment support. In turn, this could help many more people find their way into good jobs that provide real security, fulfilment, and prospects for the future. And far from provoking public consternation, it's an approach that people are open and receptive to if politicians are willing to break free of entrenched assumptions that have guided reform for so long and make a positive case for change.

# ANNEXE 1: DETAILS OF RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPANTS FOR DELIBERATIVE WORKSHOPS

Involve led the design and delivery of the deliberative workshops. They brought their extensive expertise in supporting diverse publics to come together to find solutions to complex issues. Involve is the UK's leading public participation charity. They develop, support, and campaign for new ways to involve people in decisions that affect their lives. They are committed to ensuring our democracies are vibrant and fit for the future by putting people at the heart of decision-making.

Involve worked with Manchester City Council and Camden Council to recruit the participants we needed in each location to take part, drawing on networks of people they had supported around benefits or employment in the past.

We sought participants who were currently required to attend Jobcentre appointments but to achieve diversity in the workshops across multiple characteristics, we ended up including some participants who were not currently in contact with the Jobcentre but had previous experience. We wanted this diversity of characteristics to broadly reflect the local populations in the locations where the workshops took place.

The workshops took place in Manchester on 14 and 15 February 2024, and in Camden on 27 and 28 February. The demographic mix of participants across the two workshops is summarised below:

- 54% were women and 46% were men.
- 13% were 18–24; 21% were 25–34; 32% were 35–44; 21% were 45–54; and 13% were 55–66.
- 23% identified as White British; 17% as White European; 29% as Black; and 31% as Asian.
- 22% considered themselves disabled.
- 46% said they found it harder to find a job or work because of caring responsibilities for children or other adults.

# ANNEXE 2: DETAILS OF RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPANTS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Opinium conducted two 90-minute online focus groups in March 2024. One group was all men and one all women, based on Opinium's advice that this led to more open discussions. They recruited for a range of demographic characteristics but sampled for people with incomes of at least £28k and excluded people currently on benefits or with someone else in the house on benefits. This was done to try to ensure that the conversations were primarily focused on perceptions of people on benefits rather than personal experience of the system.

In addition to these sampling criteria, potential participants were asked three questions about their attitudes towards people who are unemployed and on benefits, ranking their response on a five-point scale between two competing statements. We wanted to recruit people whose views sat towards the middle of these ranges, indicating that they were neither strongly sympathetic nor strongly critical towards people on benefits. All recruited participants averaged 2.66 to 3.66 on a five-point scale across the three questions:

**1) People who are unemployed and on benefits for a long time are probably:**

a) not trying hard enough to find a job.

b) trying to find a job but struggling against adverse circumstances.

**2) People who are unemployed and on benefits should:**

a) have to take any job available as soon as possible.

b) be able to take some time to find a job that's a good fit for them.

**3) Benefits for unemployed people are:**

a) too high and discourage them from finding jobs.

b) too low and cause hardship.

**TABLE A2.1 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS THAT TOOK PART**

| | Group 1 – Men | Group 2 – Women |
|---|---|---|
| No. Participants Attended | 7 | 6 |
| Age Split | 1x 25–34<br>1x 35–44<br>3x 45–54<br>2x 55–64 | 1x 25–34<br>3x 45–54<br>1x 25–34<br>1x 55–64 |
| Region | 1x East of England<br>2x South East<br>1x Scotland<br>1x North West<br>1x Yorkshire<br>1x London | 2x South East<br>1x Scotland<br>2x North West<br>1x London |
| Social Grade | 2x Higher<br>2x Intermediate<br>3x Supervisory | 1x Skilled Manual<br>5x Supervisory |
| No. of each 2019 vote | 2x Lab<br>3x Con<br>2x Lib Dem<br>2x Did not vote/prefer not to say | 3x Lab<br>2x Con<br>1x Lib Dem<br>2x Did not vote/prefer not to say |
| No. of Ethnic Minority | 4 | 2 |

# ENDNOTES

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