

Homeless people's experiences of welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions Executive Summary

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This report is based on research undertaken by the authors and the content does not necessarily reflect the views of Crisis or of any participating agencies. We do, of course, accept full responsibility for any inaccuracies or omissions.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents the findings from a study commissioned by Crisis and conducted by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University to explore the prevalence and experience of benefit sanctions amongst homeless people. The report was commissioned in response to growing concerns and evidence that homeless people may be disproportionately affected by sanctions, and about whether the regime is being fairly and appropriately applied to vulnerable groups.

The report is based on evidence from a face-to-face survey with 1013 homelessness service users and in-depth interviews with 42 homelessness service users who had been sanctioned in the past year. Fieldwork took place between February and July 2015.

Context

In 2012, as part of a wider programme of welfare reform, the Coalition Government introduced a new system of welfare conditionality that places greater responsibilities on wider range of claimants and imposes harsher sanctions against those who fail to comply. Underpinned by the view that rights must be balanced by responsibilities the core objective of welfare reform, and the sanctions regime specifically, is to support more people into work. Such a programme of reform is deemed necessary to tackle the problems of benefit dependency and cultures of worklessness reported to exist amongst those who are out of work.

Most notable of the changes introduced as part of the new regime are enhanced requirements placed on claimants - including setting job-search and other targets - and increased severity and length of sanctions. Some claimants can have their benefit withdrawn for up to three years if they do not meet the requirements placed upon them.

Key Findings

- The evidence points to high levels of labour market detachment amongst homelessness service users. A significant proportion of survey respondents were not 'fit for work', had health issues that limited the work they could do, and had last worked more than five years ago. However, a significant minority did have a recent work history and the vast majority wanted to work, in some cases despite having been assessed as unfit to do so. This positive disposition towards working was reflected in respondents' efforts to find work and improve their skills and employability, often independent of Jobcentre Plus requirements. In fact, many of the homelessness service users participating in this research had just the kind of disposition to work that welfare policy seeks to engender.
- There was **widespread support for a system of conditionality** amongst respondents interviewed in-depth despite the fact that all had fallen foul of this system and been sanctioned.
- Results from the survey corroborate the scant, but emerging evidence base on sanctions and **homelessness, suggesting that homelessness service users are disproportionately affected by sanctions**. In fact, they may be twice as likely to be sanctioned as the wider claimant population. In total, 39 per cent of the survey sample had been sanctioned in the past year.
- **Vulnerable claimants such as those as those with mental ill health, dependency issues, and poor literacy issues appear most adversely affected by the conditionality and sanctions regime**. They are more likely to face

difficulties meeting conditionality requirements; more likely to be sanctioned; and more likely to report negative impacts of being sanctioned.

- The evidence suggests that **it is systemic and personal barriers to meeting conditionality requirements that explain the high sanction rate amongst homelessness service users rather than unwillingness to comply**. Key barriers include: the requirement to job search online combined with homeless peoples limited access to the internet; personal circumstances and vulnerabilities limiting capability to meet requirements; insecure postal addresses; the 'full time job' of managing the many personal issues and commitments many homeless respondents have combined with limited flexibility in the benefits system; and the complexities of the system, compounded by unclear communication and processes. Only a very small minority of interview respondents had been sanctioned for wilfully failing to comply with conditionality requirements. Rather, they made honest mistakes, they had not received notification of appointments, were ill, or were set conditions clearly not appropriate to their capabilities. The majority (63 per cent) of survey respondents found the conditionality requirements placed upon them difficult to meet. **This suggests that homelessness service users are being sanctioned because they cannot comply with conditionality requirements and not because they will not comply**.
- **The conditionality imposed on respondents raised questions about consistency of practice in relation to vulnerable people**. Some respondents with poor IT proficiency and no access to the internet were required to conduct most or all of their job-seeking online (and were sanctioned for failing to do so) while others with higher levels of proficiency were allowed to use other methods, such as looking in newspapers, asking friends and family and handing out CVs.
- **Universal Jobmatch appeared to be yielding no meaningful opportunities for participants in this study**. They reported extremely low success rates (hundreds of jobs applied for with no interview secured or response of any kind received), hardly ever receiving a curtesy response to applications and jobs remaining on the website for months, arousing suspicion that they were not genuine and undermining trust in the system. These experiences had a demotivating effect for respondents, many of whom were already relatively low on self-esteem.
- Respondents valued highly the support, courses, and volunteering opportunities offered by voluntary sector organisations with which they were engaged but their views and experiences of support provided by Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme was much more mixed. **Respondents' experiences of the help and support provided through the benefit system were so variable** it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the merits and effectiveness of the different components of in-system support. Some gave high praise for a course they were referred to, while others said theirs gave them no new skills; some described helpful and understanding Work Coaches, while others reported being treated with disdain and offered nothing they recognised as help and assistance to find work.
- The evidence from this study suggests **that the sanctions regime does prompt some behavioural change, making homelessness service users more likely to comply with the conditions set down for them, where they are able to**. However, most respondents reported already doing all they could to meet their conditionality requirements.

- Being sanctioned was found to have a series of ‘unintended’ impacts on respondents’ lives, pushing them into **debt, hunger, straining relationships with friends, family and children and exacerbating mental and physical health problems** in an already vulnerable population. **Three quarters of the survey respondents who had been sanctioned said this had a negative impact on their mental health**
- There is evidence that **being sanctioned is having a significant detrimental impact on people’s housing situations** – those already homeless and those in their own accommodation – resulting in homelessness for some. **Overall 21 per cent of sanctioned respondents said they became homeless as a result of the sanction.** This is partly due to Housing Benefit sometimes ceasing when a claimant is sanctioned.
- Perversely, **the experience and detrimental impact of sanctions was found to push people further from the labour market**, or decrease their chances of securing work, in direct opposition to the policy intent.
- The study found that **homelessness service users were ‘begging borrowing and stealing’ to meet their daily needs** while sanctioned. For example, 38 per cent of sanctioned survey respondents had stolen essential items as a result of being sanctioned. Going without essentials such as food (77 per cent) and heating (64 per cent) was also commonplace. **Many were turning to voluntary and charitable support services to fill the gap** left by the withdrawal of welfare benefit income. The majority, for example, had visited a food bank (61 per cent) as a way of meeting their daily needs while sanctioned.

Policy Implications

These results have significant implications for policy. It is clear that, however well-intentioned the conditionality and sanctions regime and associated support and assistance, it is not working well for homelessness service users. In particular:

- The policy rationale for sanctions is that they encourage compliance. In other words, they are a deterrent threat, not a punishment. The very high sanction rate amongst homelessness service users indicated by this study suggests that sanctions are certainly not working or being employed as a ‘deterrent threat’.
- The sanctions system is premised upon the notion that some individuals need coaxing to engage in work related activity. However, willingness to engage with the system, support for a conditionality regime, and aspirations to work were strong amongst those participating in this study. The evidence shows that respondents often did make more concerted efforts to comply following a sanctioning - for example checking appointment times more carefully, recording job search activity more rigorously - but their disposition and attitude was unchanged because they were already positively disposed to take advantage of support and training, and seek work.
- DWP policy and guidance makes clear that *‘any work related requirements placed on claimants should be personalised according to their needs and circumstances, taking into account any restrictions.’* This stipulation does not appear to be enforced. The requirements detailed in respondents’ Claimant Commitment documents were frequently seemingly impossible to meet and inconsiderate of their constrained circumstances. In some cases, a sanction was more or less inevitable.

- Many sanctions occurred not because of 'behavioural failings' on the part of claimants, but because of systemic problems and inappropriate requirements that far exceeded respondents' capabilities and circumstances. Yet behaviour change - a key objective of the sanctions regime - cannot flow from a policy that people are unable to comply with.
- The benefit system is designed to protect the most vulnerable, and support people into work. The evidence from this studies calls into question how far these policy aspirations are being met

Summary Recommendations

We suggest that for a system of conditionality to be effective for this client group, to promote genuine efforts to help homeless people move closer to the labour market and achieve their aspirations, and to mitigate against the unintended consequences of sanctioning the following changes and measures are required.

1. DWP must ensure sanctions do not result in claimants' Housing Benefit being stopped, and report on progress in resolving this issue
2. Conditionality requirements should be suspended until housing issues are resolved:
 - > DWP should extend the current 'easement' rules on conditionality to anyone who is homeless, until their housing situation is resolved.
 - > Work Coaches should be required to ascertain whether an individual is homeless or at risk of homelessness so that the easement can be applied.
3. Work Coaches and contracted providers should exercise greater leniency when financial sanctions are likely to put an individual at risk of homelessness or destitution
 - > DWP should introduce a new financial assessment for Jobcentre Plus decision makers to deliver before a financial sanction can be issued.
 - > Contracted providers of employment support programmes should be given greater freedoms not to raise a doubt over a sanctionable offence when deemed inappropriate to supporting a homeless person into work; and DWP should issue guidance on what might constitute a 'vulnerable' person.
 - > DWP should introduce a 'warning system' for a first failure to comply with conditionality requirements for claimants with a history of homelessness, in place of a sanction.
4. Employment support and conditionality requirements should be better tailored for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
 - > The DWP commissioning framework, and future devolved commissioning models in Scotland and via city deals, should incorporate an in-depth assessment process that takes into account the barriers homeless people, or those at risk of becoming homelessness, face.
 - > DWP should introduce a uniform set of service standards across Jobcentre Plus and contracted out provision to ensure high quality services are delivered and homeless people receive the support needed to overcome specific barriers to work.
 - > Providers of employment support provision, including Jobcentre Plus, should include housing and

homelessness specialists within their delivery model.

- > DWP guidance on the Claimant Commitment should clearly state that jobseeking activities should be co-designed between the claimant and Work Coach, and reviewed on an ongoing basis.
 - > Work Coaches and contracted providers should capitalise on the positive efforts claimants are already making to improve employability by supporting their engagement with the voluntary sector to access support, courses or volunteering opportunities.
5. DWP must fully evaluate the effectiveness of conditionality and sanctions in moving people into the labour market
- > DWP should commission a review of the effectiveness of the current conditionality and sanctions regime, including evaluation of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the regime in supporting homeless claimants into work.
 - > DWP should formally report on progress in meeting the recommendations of the Oakley review.

About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help homeless people to transform their lives. We measure our success and can demonstrate tangible results and value for money.

We are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience.

We have ambitious plans for the future and are committed to help more people in more places across the UK. We know we won't end homelessness overnight or on our own. But we take a lead, collaborate with others and together make change happen.

Get in touch

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