

Welfare Reform Committee

Note of visit to Parkhead CAB to meet claimants affected by benefit sanctions - 25 March 2014

Main issues raised:

- In 2012 the sanctions regime changed, the impact was the number of sanctions increased and the sanctions were longer.
- Communication from DWP to clients can be poor. In some cases, claimants do not even realise that a sanction has been applied and claimants are sometimes unclear about why a sanction has been applied. Difficult to contact appropriate person who has made the decision to sanction to find out reason why, claimants being told different and incorrect information about who they have to contact.
- Communication about worksearch interviews can also be poor. For example, claimants can find out at short notice (or sometimes they only find out after the date has passed) that they have to attend an interview with Jobcentre Staff.
- There are many administrative issues e.g. about staff not knowing what decisions have been made, claimants receiving letters late etc.
- There is a lack of flexibility to rearrange appointments with JobCentre staff no matter what the circumstances are, for example because a claimant has childcare issues, or is ill. Missed appointments can mean that a benefit sanction is applied.
- There is inconsistency in how JobCentre Plus staff monitor the claimant's record of jobseeking activity – some are more scrupulous than others.
- Sanction decisions can be appealed. However, even if a sanction decision is overturned on appeal a claimant may not receive the money owed to them straight away, in some cases many months.
- There is little information available to claimants about hardship payments or the ability to appeal a sanction decision. Of those who do appeal, there is a very high success rate of decisions being overturned.
- JobCentre Plus staff are not clear about jobseeking requirements.
- Claimants are expected to search for work online (using the Universal Jobmatch facility), however a number of claimants are not computer literate or do not have easy access to a PC.
- Jobs advertised on Universal Jobmatch can be out of date.

- Worksearch requirements could be unreasonable, for example, travelling to an interview that would take a long time by public transport. Highly qualified people were expected to look for any type of work but employers would tell them they were overqualified for certain jobs.
- The threat of benefit sanctions being applied, and the conditionality requirements can be a constant source of stress.
- A sea change in culture of jobcentre plus offices, there was a feeling that Jobcentre staff were disrespectful and judgemental. Jobcentre plus offices can feel intimidating rather than helpful.
- Jobcentre plus staff do not get enough training and have been burdened with all the changes. Heavy workload could also be affecting the ability of the decision makers to make correct decisions.
- If a sanction has been applied then all the JSA is lost for a certain period of time. Claimants can get into further debt or have to borrow from friends and family.
- If a sanction has been applied then there is a risk of a longer sanction being applied. Many claimants unaware that this is the case.
- Lone parents can face particular issues e.g. the ability to look for work and the type of work they can apply for can be limited by childcare issues. Lone parents have been discouraged from taking on voluntary work even though this was regarded by the client as valuable.
- The use of food banks has increased. CAB said that the main reason for the increase in food banks was the maladministration of benefits.
- There are bigger questions about sanctions that need to be answered i.e. if the purpose is to achieve compliance with jobseeking requirements but clients are not aware of that, what is the point?
- Concern that the jobseeking activities that claimants are being asked to undertake are not meaningful and just a tick box exercise.
- Employment and Support Allowance issues are increasing - people are not aware of the mandatory requirements.
- Even if a claimant has a job offer and evidence of it, they are still expected to actively seek work until the job is started - an offer of a job does not appear to prevent a sanction being applied.
- A lone parent thought that there was a need to have a jobseeker one parent specialist who could get to know you and advise appropriately.