

Institute for Public Policy Research



WORKING TOGETHER

**TOWARDS A NEW PUBLIC
EMPLOYMENT SERVICE**

**Melanie Wilkes
and Henry Parkes**

September 2023

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SUMMARY

The UK's employment support system is characterised by three core flaws.

- **It is failing to meet the needs of our current or future economy.** There is no targeting of support towards growth sectors, despite the net zero transition offering the potential for significant jobs growth, and being held back by skills shortages.
- **Extrinsic motivation is crowding out personal ambitions.** The assumption that people have no intrinsic motivation to find work, has led to an increasing use of the threat of financial penalties to drive engagement, despite evidence that this is counter-productive (Wright et al 2018).
- **Provision is too narrow and focussed on the short term.** The 'any job' model limits a focus on sustainable, long term goals, and there are 150,000 economically inactive disabled people who want to work but are missing out on support.

WE NEED A HIGH-QUALITY PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

This paper outlines a proposal for transformative long term change, to develop a new public employment service, built on three core principles.

A public service: for everyone, available any time

A comprehensive menu of community-based support to meet individual needs

Supporting long term retention and progression in secure and good quality work

This will involve a substantial scale-up in provision to deliver support to people whose needs are not met within the current system, alongside embedding a new relational approach to support.

It should be underpinned by strategic alignment between the UK's industrial strategy and employment support services, and action to bring more decision-making about jobcentres and wider employment support services closer to local communities. This can be delivered through the following nine-point plan.

1. **Expand Jobcentre Plus provision through a reformed work coach role and an extended workforce.**
 - The work coach role should be professionalised, with a review of responsibilities and skills informing a commensurate shift in pay.
 - Work coaches should be responsible for identifying and taking account of the needs and preferences of those they support, and engaging with local employers to shape secure, good quality work within their local communities.

2. **Limit conditionality to facilitate person-centred support on universal credit.**
 - People with health conditions, single parents and parents of young children on universal credit should be exempt from requirements or financial penalties under any circumstances.
 - For all other groups, a sanction should only be applied as a last resort, where attempts at engagement have broken down.
3. **Devolve and co-produce employment policy with local communities.**
 - Government should devolve commissioning responsibility for employment support, management of jobcentres and the adult education budget to the devolved nations, all combined authorities and to London.
 - In other areas, government should pilot alternative approaches to de-centralised commissioning with local authorities, building on the universal support model.
4. **Invest in a range of specialist support for disabled people.**
 - Accelerate delivery of universal support as a voluntary route to employment support for disabled people.
 - Re-design and expand specialist voluntary provision for disabled people in and out of work that is not restricted to those receiving universal credit.
5. **Integrate industrial strategy with a strategic approach to employment policy to deliver good quality, inclusive work.**
 - Government should develop an ambitious industrial strategy which is integrated with employment policy, and attach an expectation of engagement with employment support services as a condition for strategic sector investment.
 - Additional resource should be provided to support training and placement opportunities in key growth sectors such as renewable energy.
6. **Break down barriers to work and training.**
 - Strengthen work incentives in universal credit so that individuals are always meaningfully better off in work
 - Trial targeted use of wage subsidies and tax incentives to support targeted investment in skills within priority sectors identified through the industrial strategy.
7. **Invest in digital approaches to support.**
 - DWP should trial a series of digital employment and training offers.
8. **Improve service quality and accountability.**
 - DWP should embed a new approach to measuring impact taking account of user feedback, work coach relationships, job quality, pay and longevity, as well as alignment with individual needs.
 - Jobcentre and commissioned employment support provision should be externally inspected with support for ongoing improvement.
9. **Raise the floor of working standards with a new Employment Bill**
 - This should clarify employment status, limit insecure zero hour contracts and extend access to flexible working and sick pay.

1. INTRODUCTION

Access to high quality, secure work can be transformative.

Jobs that offer autonomy, flexibility, scope for progression, social support and strong terms and conditions don't simply offer a route out of poverty, they can form a key part of our identity and sense of belonging. But large numbers of people face structural barriers to entering and staying in work, and too many jobs across the UK don't deliver these fundamental elements of quality employment. This is contributing to a low pay, low productivity economy.

Working life in the UK has changed significantly. The era of a single career is now a thing of the past, and large scale shifts in our economy and society will continue to impact the way we work over the years ahead. From the net zero transition to developments in automation, transitions are rapidly changing the types of skills employers need. But our jobcentres and employment services aren't resourced to support individuals and employers to meet these challenges.

And with an ageing workforce and growing proportion of people working with a long term health condition, the support individuals need to stay in work or navigate changes in circumstances is evolving too. The sustained use of pressure through requiring people to complete specific actions at the risk of a sanction is causing harm, eroding trust, and limiting scope for meaningful engagement.

To break out of this mould, we need a comprehensive rewiring of our approach to delivering employment support through greater involvement of local communities and deeper alignment with an ambitious industrial strategy. This paper sets out a vision for a new public employment service, and outlines the steps needed over the short and long term to realise that ambition.

The impact of this new approach could be transformative; breaking down barriers to work for people who are economically inactive, unlocking routes to job-relevant training and progression and supporting people in work to navigate changes in their lives.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This project involved a literature review and stakeholder interviews, and has been developed in partnership with Changing Realities, a participatory online research project, which documents life on a low income. A workshop in May 2023 discussing experiences of employment support and sharing ideas to improve the system involving over 50 participants, and quotes from other qualitative research activities provided to bring life to the challenges and opportunities outlined through this paper.

2. THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Through employment support the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) seeks to (DWP 2023b):

- maximise employment, reduce economic inactivity, and support the progression of people in work
- enable disabled people and people with health conditions to start, stay, and succeed in work, and get financial support.

This chapter argues our current system is failing on its own terms, with three underlying issues at its core.

TABLE 2.1: THERE ARE THREE UNDERLYING ISSUES AT THE CORE OF OUR SYSTEM

A system failing on its own terms	The system doesn't meet the current or future needs of our economy	<p>This system pushes people into low skilled, low productivity work and actively undermines job quality as a policy objective. It is also failing to meet the needs of employers.</p> <p>Neither employment support nor employer facing services have been developed as part of a broader industrial strategy, and as a result are insufficiently focussed on growth sectors (eg renewable energy) or shortage sectors</p>
	Provision is too narrow, and focussed on the short term	<p>Employment services are not meeting the needs of people who face the greatest barriers to work, whether that's disabled people, single parents or carers.</p> <p>Opportunities are missed for employment support services to play a role in driving up inclusive good quality work within their local communities.</p>
	A focus on extrinsic motivation through compliance and enforcement	<p>The system assumes people have no Intrinsic motivation to find work, instead focussing on formal requirements and the threat of financial penalties for non-compliance. This dynamic shapes the relationship between work coaches and claimants, limiting scope for meaningful collaboration and progress.</p>

Source: Authors' analysis

The successful transformation in employment support outlined in this briefing will hinge on providing an adequate level of financial support to individuals in and out of work. Put simply, low levels of social security are themselves a barrier to finding good work, with a recent evidence review finding negative associations

between lower levels of income replacement and employment outcomes (Porter and Johnson-Hunter 2023). This relates in part to the up-front costs that people face as they look for and move in to work, but also the cognitive strain of poverty, with evidence that those on very low incomes have a reduced mental bandwidth for searching or applying for work. Separately IPPR is examining the issue of social security levels.

Further, the sharp withdrawal of financial support as earnings rise remains a substantial disincentive, with people losing up to 70 per cent of any additional income in tax and reduced social security (Brewer et al 2021). Alongside additional costs such as transport and childcare, it is unsurprising that increased working hours don't leave many on UC meaningfully better off.

A BROKEN JOBS MACHINE: PROVISION IS NARROW, AND FOCUSED ON THE SHORT TERM

“It almost felt like I was in a ‘job machine’ where they would just churn out jobs they thought I could apply for even though I have an area of expertise, which they disregarded.”

Mollie U

Employment support through jobcentres and commissioned services is not working for many households on low incomes. The focus on short-term increases in earnings shapes the decisions work coaches and providers are able to make, encouraging people to apply for ‘any job’ rather than one which best reflects an individual’s skills and personal circumstances.

Employment support is largely limited to people receiving income related social security payments. This means that some people who face complex barriers to entering or staying in work, including disabled people and parents or carers, have limited access to advice and support.

EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT IS NOT DELIVERING FOR PEOPLE FACING BARRIERS TO WORK

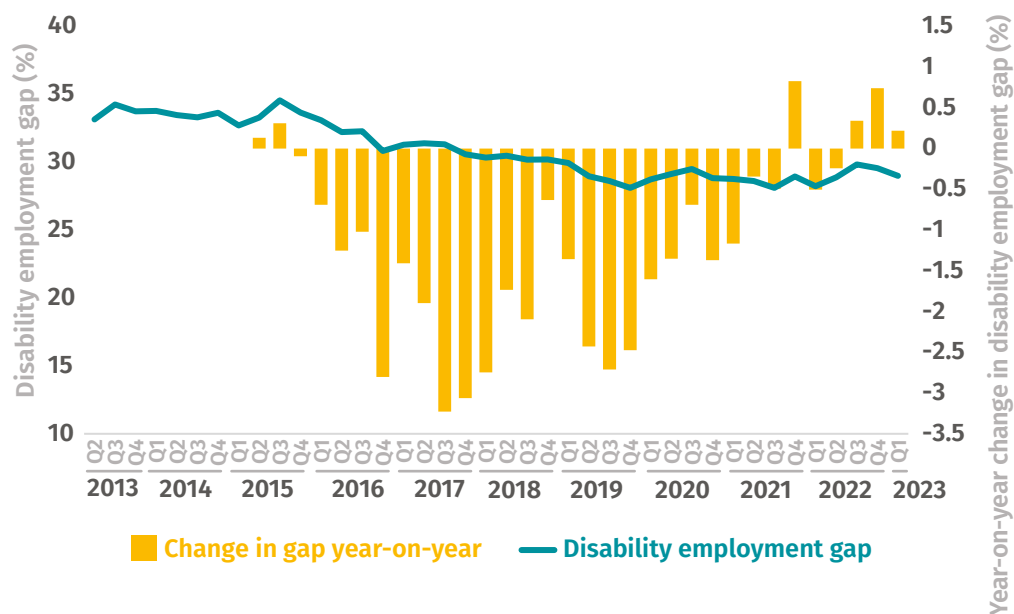
For disabled people, parents and carers, a combination of insufficiently specialist employment support and rigid rules within the social security system are exacerbating structural barriers to entering and staying in work.

Progress on the disability employment gap has stalled having seen progress between 2013 and 2019,¹ with the employment rate for disabled people 29 percentage points higher than non-disabled people in the latest data – the same as at the start of the pandemic. Many disabled people continue to face structural barriers to entering and staying in work.

1 Some of this progress is attributed to a rising number of working-age people who identify as disabled over this period.

FIGURE 2.1: PROGRESS ON TACKLING THE DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT GAP HAS STALLED

Disability employment gap Q2 2013 – Q1 2023



Source: IPPR analysis of ONS 2023c

Our research suggests that jobcentre support is not meeting the needs of disabled people. The DWP has reduced capacity for specialist support through disability employment advisers while increasing scope for discretion among generalist work coaches, leading to concerns that some are not sufficiently trained to support disabled people and may be setting inappropriate requirements (Work and Pensions Select Committee 2023).

In addition to in-house support, the Work and Health programme is focussed on people with a long term health condition and is delivered on a commissioned basis² by a combination of charities and companies across the country. The latest available data indicates take-up of the programme has been limited, with 40,000 disabled people starting the programme in the year to February 2023, which pales in comparison to an estimated 490,000 people with 'limited capability for work' who want to work.³

There are various possible explanations for this.

- Work coaches may not have the resource or incentives to engage in active outreach with individuals who aren't subject to requirements.
- Preconceptions of jobcentre support shaped by previous experiences or those friends and family.
- Because individuals expect regular re-assessments, there is concern that taking steps towards work could jeopardise their 'fitness for work' status resulting

2 Alongside jobcentre provision, the DWP also commissions providers to deliver employment support. This allows for the delivery of specialist support focussed on specific groups of people, which can offer greater value for money and specific expertise when effective.

3 Estimate for England and Wales only. The government's research from 2019 found that 20 per cent of individuals on universal credit and with limited capability for work related activity (LCWRA) would like to work (GOV.UK 2020) – assuming the same ratio for those with limited capability to work (LCW) only and applying to the UC/ESA LCW/LCWRA caseload over the same period yields 490,000 people who want to work and so may benefit from support. We cannot calculate precise take-up figures as some people in the caseload may have participated in a previous year of the programme, but these figures illustrate the likely gap between starts and those who could benefit.

in financial losses of over £4,600 a year. Proposed plans to reform the work capability assessment aim to address this, with a new ‘health element’ within universal credit.⁴

Government has expressed some recognition of these challenges, with trials of individual placement and support for disabled people (DWP 2023f) and the planned introduction of ‘universal support’, a new supported employment model. While these hold potential, there is a need to offer a broader range of person-centred approaches that may prove more effective supporting a broader group of people than current programmes.

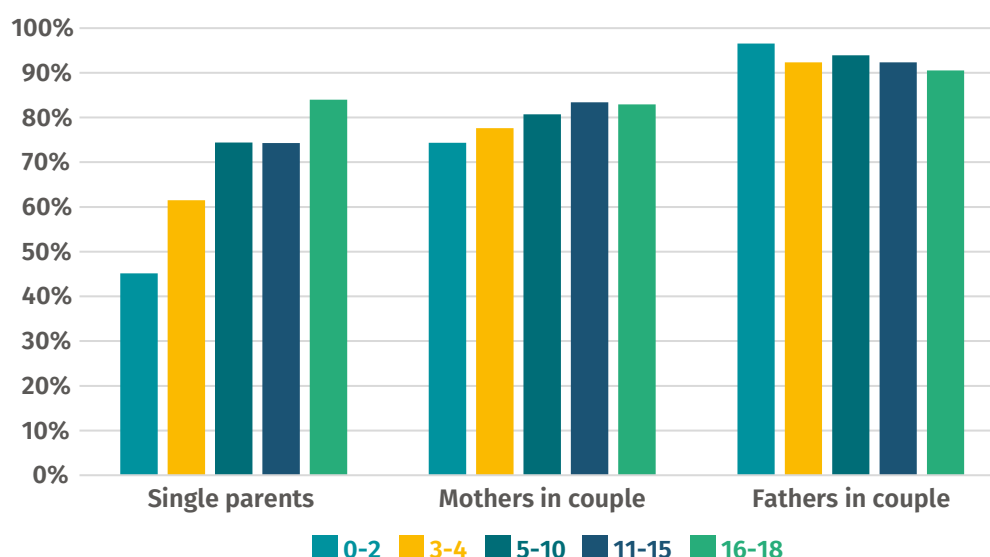
Failure of voluntary programmes to reach disabled people who may want to access support is not only impacting those on universal credit. There are significant numbers of people (150,000) inactive due to ill-health who would like to work, but have no interaction with universal credit or its predecessor benefits⁵ (IPPR analysis of ONS 2023d) indicating there could be real value in extending employment support to individuals not accessing social security.

CARERS AND PARENTS FACE DISTINCT CHALLENGES AND NEED SPECIALIST SUPPORT

In addition, carers and single parents continue to struggle to find work that offers flexibility to fit in with their lives (Clery et al 2022). Prohibitive childcare costs are also a barrier to work – the current system limits the entitlement of 30 hours of free childcare to working parents, and while support is available through universal credit, this is limited to 85 per cent of total costs. This limits time and bandwidth for parents out of work to take steps towards employment (CPAG 2023). Single parents face acute challenges in this context, and are far more likely to be out of work than coupled parents, particularly for those with the youngest children.

FIGURE 2.2: SINGLE PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN HAVE VERY LOW EMPLOYMENT RATES

Parental employment rates by age of youngest child



Source: IPPR analysis of ONS 2023d

4 This would be linked to receipt of personal independence payment (PIP). While this could eliminate the disincentives of the current system, there are approximately half a million disabled people getting support now who would not qualify for the health element under this new approach (DWP 2023d)

5 Specifically those legacy benefits which involve contact with the work coach: jobseekers allowance, employment and support allowance or income support.

Our social security system also creates barriers to work for second earners. Couple households are only allowed a single work allowance, meaning that as a second adult moves in to work, their financial support typically tapers away immediately, losing 55 pence in universal credit for every pound earned, strongly reducing incentives to work. Other benefits can be withdrawn simultaneously, resulting in a 'cliff edge' in support, as one parent explains:

“What they don’t tell you is that despite still being on universal credit, as well as tapering off your benefit amount they also remove your free NHS prescriptions (doctors, dentist and eye), take away your council tax reduction, and make your younger children not eligible for free school meals (and uniform vouchers). That’s a huge whack for going one penny over the income threshold.”

Florrie W

THE ‘ANY JOB’ MODEL DRIVES A FOCUS ON SHORT TERM EARNINGS OVER LONG TERM, SECURE WORK

As it stands, the UK labour market is characterised by insecure work (Florisson 2022), and our employment support system is feeding that system.

The current approach to employment support is based on a model termed ‘Any Job, Better Job, Career’ in which service users out of work are encouraged to apply for any role which generates some earnings in the first instance, before, in theory, being supported to progress in work and ultimately towards a career.

But there is scant evidence that DWP services are doing this - outcome measures do not take account of earnings above set thresholds, working conditions or scope for progression. There is real potential in investing in careers advice and support for workers to identify training opportunities and navigate the skills system. However, meaningful changes in earnings for individuals on the lowest incomes will require systemic interventions, such as legislation and wage bargaining to raise the floor of working standards.

Instead, by prioritising getting off universal credit, individuals are pushed into taking low quality jobs which are inappropriate to their personal circumstances and caring responsibilities.

“They are not very understanding and don’t try to see it from your position. They are very pushy and constantly pestering you. I have a one year old and [work coaches] are not very understanding of my child’s needs. I shouldn’t have to leave a breastfeeding child full time.”

Benny V

“I actually haven’t received any valid employment support ... I find that ... my universal credit work coach is really unhelpful ... I’m struggling, I find it difficult to try to fit things around my son who has additional needs ... [work coaches] just want you to get anything and everything. But getting anything and everything still needs to fit in with family life.”

Faith N

This has broader implications for individual health and wellbeing too. Several studies have found that insecure work can be as bad for health as unemployment (Green 2020, Lubke 2021, D’Souza et al 2003).

Changing Realities participants with established work experience and qualifications described feeling under-served by Jobcentres.

“I think the job centre and work coaches need to be more accommodating to peoples skill sets and interests. Not just throw ‘any job’ at them, it’s demeaning and makes you feel invisible.”

Mollie U

Individuals who want to build new skills can face even greater challenges. Many are required to spend the equivalent of a full working week looking for a job and must be available to start work at any time. This can prevent taking part in any form of training, which may provide a route to higher paid, more secure work over the longer-term (Gable 2022). The ‘Train and Progress’ pilots (DWP 2021) present welcome recognition of this issue, but are limited to short courses of up to three months. Alongside fully implementing this programme, there is a need for a broader review of the role of grants and loans to support lifelong learning.

An alternative model might see claimants spend longer on universal credit in the short-run, but moving into better quality, more appropriate employment in the longer-run.

A FOCUS ON EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION THROUGH COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT

Our employment support system has long been shaped by conditionality: everyone who receives means-tested financial support is required to either prepare or search for work, and face a financial penalty where they don’t comply, or provide justification for an exemption from the rules. This means jobcentres and other employment services are perceived primarily as a means of enforcing rules, rather than providing meaningful support to re-enter or progress in work (Pollard 2019).

There is growing evidence that this approach is actively causing harm to service users and their families and is ineffective at supporting people into sustained work.

CONDITIONALITY ERODES TRUST AND LIMITS THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF WORK COACHES

Conditionality uses extrinsic motivation – a threat that financial support will be reduced or stopped – to induce people to meet specific requirements.

This rests on an assumption that people on low incomes wouldn’t want to take steps to improve their situation of their own free will. It fails to recognise that many people want to work or increase their earnings, but face barriers to doing so. This can include factors like limited access to childcare, low confidence, high travel costs or living with a health condition. For many, difficulties securing flexible or part-time roles is what is holding them back from working, rather than a lack of motivation.

Studies have shown that extrinsic motivations, like the threat of a sanction, can crowd out individual personal ambition and motivations, which can be more effective in driving better outcomes (Deci 1999). People can be at crisis point when they are required to first agree to their claimant commitment, and it can be very difficult to think about work under such circumstances.

This approach is in stark contrast to other public services – while health professionals may advise on lifestyle changes to stay well, access to care is not conditional on that advice being followed, even where it might offer savings to the taxpayer over the longer term.

The close weaving together of financial support and requirements means that individuals in need of urgent financial assistance may feel under pressure to agree to terms that feel unrealistic based on their caring responsibilities or health needs (Parkes 2022).

This could involve people feeling obliged to apply for a role with hours they couldn't work, or which requires skills or experience they don't hold, solely to meet the expectations of their work coach and avoid the risk of a sanction. This is not only deeply inefficient, but also it erodes any notion that work coaches are prioritising the best interests of the individuals they support.

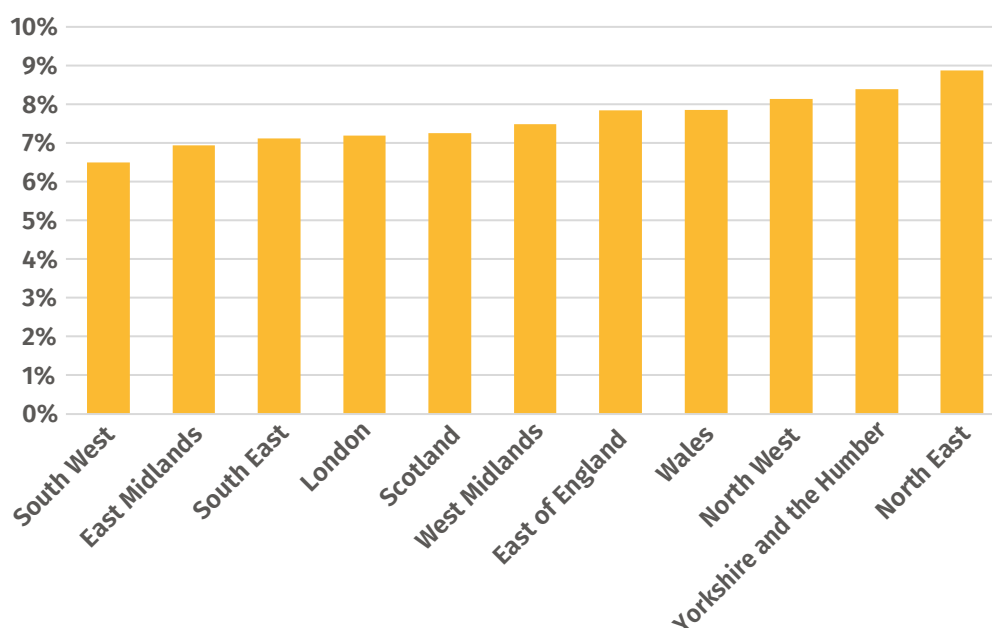
“They ask me to apply for jobs which I was not going to be selected. I got a job on my own... We all know what job we can do and what we can't do.”

Isabella-rose S

IPPR analysis (Parkes 2023) has found wide variation in sanctions decisions across the country, even when controlling for variations in local population characteristics. Someone in the North East is over 35 per cent more likely to be sanctioned than someone in the South West.

FIGURE 2.3: SANCTIONING RATES VARY TREMENDOUSLY ACROSS THE UK, SUGGESTING A LACK OF CONSISTENCY

Sanction rate on universal credit for 'searching for work' group by region



Source: IPPR analysis of DWP 2023i

Previous analysis also highlighted a sharp increase in the sanctions rate relative to the years before the pandemic (ibid). Inconsistent decision making will impact trust in the system, presenting a barrier to constructive engagement in support, even for those who are not sanctioned. It is very difficult to form positive working relationships in this context, and that in turn limits scope for information sharing and support.

CONDITIONALITY HAS BEEN EXTENDED, DESPITE EVIDENCE IT CAN BE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE AND CAUSE HARM

While conditionality and sanctions have existed for some time, successive reforms have seen a growth in the number of people subject to requirements, and a significant increase in the degree of discretion held by individual work coaches over sanctioning decisions.

Applying sanctions can serve to undermine the intended objectives of employment support. An in-depth five-year longitudinal study found that welfare conditionality “did not ensure a move into paid work; and had little impact on meaningful in-work progression or sustainability” (Wright et al 2018). A recently published DWP analysis found that sanctions “decrease the rate of exit into higher paid work” (DWP 2023g).

There is growing evidence that through reducing financial support to individuals already living on a low income, sanctions can cause significant harm. The National Audit Office observed that sanctions can lead to “hardship, hunger and depression” (The National Audit Office 2016). Even where sanctions are not applied, the distress associated with the risk of losing financial support can have negative impacts.

“They’re not compassionate if you miss an appointment due to kids being unwell or your disability, they pressure you by saying they will stop your money.”

Olivia-Rose I

Despite this evidence, conditionality has been extended. This has included reducing the time period people can spend searching for work in their sector before being required to apply for any job (DWP 2022b), and increasing the number of those on universal credit expected to increase their hours and earnings by raising the administrative earnings threshold⁶ (DWP 2022c).

“I’m terrified for when the new universal credit minimum hours come into force as I will drop below the threshold and will therefore be expected to seek additional work.”

Jenny D

This presents acute challenges to people who need to work fewer hours, including parents, carers and disabled people. It is another needless use of extrinsic motivators – assuming that people are able to increase their hours or earnings, and simply need to be incentivised to do so. But many workers on low incomes have limited influence over their working hours, and progression routes for part-time workers are limited.

AN UNFULFILLED PARTNERSHIP: EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT IS NOT MEETING THE NEEDS OF EMPLOYERS OR OUR WIDER ECONOMY

Recent research has found that many employers have been frustrated by the ‘any job’ model. For some, it led to high volumes of unsuitable applications, which increasing recruitment costs causing inefficiencies with shortlisted candidates not attending interviews, and often wasn’t conducive to finding a candidate with the right skills or motivation for the role (Jones and Carson 2023).

But this needn’t be the case. The same study also identified success stories – where some DWP schemes, particularly Sector Based Work Academy Programmes, which involved more in-depth engagement with employers and job-relevant training and support to candidates.

6 This determines the extent of requirements to search and apply for work that individuals on universal credit face. Individuals earning below the threshold are in the ‘intensive work search’ conditionality group, while those earning above it are in the ‘light touch’ group.

The sheer volume of different employment and training schemes, with differing eligibility and funding rules, can prove difficult for employers to navigate. There is a potential role for financial incentives and ‘intermediary’ organisations to connect employers with the right schemes.

EMPLOYERS ARE STRUGGLING WITH SKILLS SHORTAGES, AND THE WORKFORCE IS SHRINKING

Employers across the UK are struggling to recruit workers with the skills they need. 86 per cent of larger organisations and 68 per cent of SMEs are facing skills shortages (Open University 2022). Demographic changes including the recent increase in economic inactivity and immigration rules mean they are facing a contracting pool of talent to draw from and causing high profile shortages in specific sectors and occupations.

Skills gaps and shortages are a long-standing issue, made worse by declining employer investment in workforce training. This is driven in part by the ongoing casualisation of work and acutely affected by the current economic crisis (Kumar et al 2023). In parallel, public funding for lifelong learning has reduced sharply.

This suggests that there is a role for government to play in rethinking incentives and support for employers to invest in training. In addition, there will also be a case for government resourced training, particularly for individuals who are looking to re-skill or change careers.

Our jobcentres aren’t equipped to facilitate access to training. Individuals report that their work coach lacked up to date information about local training opportunities, including high profile schemes such as Skills Bootcamps (Gable 2022) or accreditations essential for specific professions.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRATEGIC SECTOR TARGETING ARE MISSED

Our economy is transforming. The potential for job creation through the transition to a net zero economy is estimated at 1.6 million (Jung 2020), with new jobs across engineering, manufacturing, construction and retrofitting in particular. But skills gaps ranging from project management, engineering and modern methods of construction could hamper workforce growth (Green Jobs Taskforce 2021).

In parallel, some workers will face acute challenges as our economy evolves – roles in high street retail are reducing with a sustained increase in online shopping; growing use of automation is changing the nature of work in some industries, and communities home to carbon-intensive industries may experience insecurity through the transition to net zero. In each of these circumstances, there is a clear and compelling case for targeted support.

It is essential that the state steps in to facilitate these transitions, learning the lessons from previous periods of industrial upheaval. The closure of the UK’s coal mines saw large numbers of workers, and their families and communities, lose their livelihoods. With no coordinated action to stimulate job creation in other sectors, many moved into long term unemployment.

Our employment services are not directed to focus on these priority sectors. Several parts of Government interact with employers, candidates and our skills system. Too often, this work is siloed (Gable 2022), but the return to a focus on industrial strategy, both in the US under President Biden and here in the UK, presents an opportunity for employment support to be more integrated with a wider economic plan. The UK urgently needs an ambitious and comprehensive industrial strategy to unlock faster and fairer growth.

3.

THE VISION: A PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT SERVICE

Drawing on the evidence highlighted through this paper, the following sections set out a long-term vision for change in employment support in the UK, comprising three core principles.

A public service: for everyone, available any time

A comprehensive menu of community-based support to meet individual needs

Supporting long term retention and progression in secure and good quality work

1. A public service for everyone, available any time

By limiting support to people on universal credit, we are stifling the potential impact of employment services. Instead, the new public employment service should be open to everyone who wants support to enter or stay in work. This ambitious and radical change in approach will require substantially scaling up support both within and beyond jobcentres over time.

2. Offering a comprehensive menu of community-based support that works for people and employers

Support should become more personalised, focussed on reaching goals that feel right to the individual getting support, and fit with their personal circumstances.

To enable collaborative, trusting relationships, sanctions will become a last resort for people closer to work, and support for disabled people, parents of young children and carers will be wholly voluntary.

Decision-making should be devolved to enable the development of support grounded in local communities.

3. Supporting long-term retention and progression in secure and good quality work

This means developing a greater variety of support for people in work to progress in to more secure and well-paid jobs, including tailored advice and high quality, job-relevant training and apprenticeships. Services should actively avoid supporting people into precarious work.

People at risk of falling out of the labour market should be offered support to navigate transitions in their lives, and providers should play an active role in brokering adjustments and flexible working.

EMBEDDING RELATIONAL, PERSON-CENTRED SUPPORT

To make this vision a reality, we need to move from transactional employment support to a fundamentally different model.

A well-established body of evidence shows that employment support grounded in meaningful relationships and adapted to the specific needs and preferences of individuals is considerably more effective at supporting people to enter, stay or progress in work (Green 2018, Wilson et al 2018). Rather than prescribing a specific approach from the top down, the public employment service should involve co-design and co-commissioning of services with individuals with lived experience.

TABLE 3.1: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TRANSACTIONAL AND PERSON-CENTRED EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

Transactional support	Person-centred, relational support
Actions are prescribed by support providers.	Individuals accessing support are equal partners
Services are designed by policy makers	The perspectives, ideas and preferences of individuals using support shape plans and actions.
Support is light-touch, with short meetings	Individuals with lived experience of accessing employment support or other specific circumstances are involved in shaping services through consultation or co-design, and in delivery
Extrinsic motivators are used to motivate individuals to attend meetings and complete actions	

Source: Authors' analysis

Person centred support should facilitate a new dynamic between work coaches or employment support providers and individuals accessing support. The case study below illustrates how user-led approaches could help to facilitate this changed dynamic.

YOUR WORK, YOUR WAY

The **Your Work, Your Way** project led by the Child Poverty Action Group used flexible budgeting, offering service users a budget to meet some of the costs of moving into work, such as travel and childcare. In addition, there is a pot of up to £2,000 per participant to use for training or employment opportunities, including purchasing a laptop and accountancy course fees and AAT registration or in another case, funding HGV driver training and assessment.

This approach recognises and supports the intrinsic motivations held by participants, providing them the autonomy and flexibility to take actions to pursue their own goals.

Person centred support may also include tailoring support to address the distinct barriers to work that an individual is facing (Green 2018), for example through support with housing, debt or occupational health services. For example, the **Households into Work project in Liverpool City Region** was developed to support households affected by long term worklessness. Support is highly person centred, with the frequency of meetings, their focus, engagement with other services tailored to the needs of each household. The service supported 28 per cent of participants

into employment, and over half of participants experienced progress towards work (Tyrell 2020).

A particularly effective route to enabling greater integration between services is what is increasingly termed a ‘no wrong door’ approach. Through this model individuals who express an interest in employment or training while accessing other public services, such as housing or debt advice, are supported to access employment support (Mayor of London 2022). Our current system has a single entry point for almost everyone who accesses it – universal credit. This would be particularly valuable in expanding provision to a public employment service.

Evidence reviews have underlined the value of peer support for individuals with shared experiences if sufficiently targeted around specific employment goals (Green and Taylor 2018, McEnhill et al 2016). This is an inherently relational approach, and has been evidenced to build confidence, establish trusting and lasting social connections and demonstrating the potential outcomes of employment support. This has been reflected through the new trials of peer mentor roles to support individuals recovering from drug or alcohol dependency to move towards work (DWP 2023e).

Similar ambitious transitions in the way that support is delivered have been successful in other public services. For example, mental health care support in England has a history of coercion-based approaches to engagement. Recent years have seen a growing recognition of the fact that not only is this unethical, but it is also less effective than relational support where service users and clinicians or care providers are working towards a shared goal. This has manifested in a range of ways, with a greater emphasis on managing the power dynamic between individuals accessing and providing support, and growing recognition of the value of lived experience in designing and delivering support.

THE TRADE-OFFS OF A MORE RELATIONAL APPROACH

It is important to underline that this approach aims to facilitate sustainable moves into secure work, and to open up opportunities for progression over the long term, even where this may mean that individuals on low incomes have a longer initial period of support before they first enter or change jobs.

4.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: CHANGES TO DELIVER A HIGH-QUALITY PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

SCALING UP SUPPORT

A public employment service is attainable here in the UK. It will require substantial investment in services and scaling-up of support. This could be accelerated through:

- expanding jobcentre plus provision through a reformed work coach role and an extended workforce
- empowering local communities to shape and develop support in their local area
- Investing in digital approaches to support.

This should be supported by a strategic, cross-government approach to employment support which is closely integrated with a sector-focussed industrial strategy, and supported by local industrial strategies and placed-based skills plans. Working towards more relational approaches will need a concerted effort to forge trust and support among the individuals and employers who have felt underserved by the system.

1. EXPANDING JOBCENTRE PLUS PROVISION THROUGH A REFORMED WORK COACH ROLE AND AN EXTENDED WORKFORCE

Within the new public employment service, work coaches will be the first point of contact, and stand to play a pivotal role in ensuring individuals get the support they need. For many people using services, work coaches will be an equivalent to a GP for employment – they will work with individuals to identify distinct challenges they are facing through an initial ‘triage’ and may then refer them on to specialist employment support or training.

Others may access support on an ongoing basis from their work coach. This will be contingent on fostering strong personal relationships, a high degree of trust, and a deep understanding of structural barriers to work. The case study below illustrates a re-imagined role for employment advisers:

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF EMPLOYMENT ADVISERS – HOUSEHOLDS INTO WORK

The Households into Work scheme in Liverpool City Region involved rethinking the value and autonomy of case workers. Through this service, support is provided by an ‘Employment Advocate’ who supports households to identify and work towards their goals. They have considerable autonomy when compared with traditional employment support services which facilitated more in-depth relationship building, a greater understanding of wider support services available locally, and more creative approaches to support (Tyrell 2020).

Work coaches are currently on the same pay grade as administrators within the civil service. This is partly reflective of the recent emphasis on administering requirements and sanctions referrals. But this is below the median wage (ONS 2023) and not commensurate with the responsibilities the role should entail. DWP workers have attempted to negotiate a pay rise, with the PCS union arguing one in five are themselves reliant on universal credit (PCS 2023).

Facilitating a transition to relational support will require increasing work coach autonomy, rethinking the appropriate combination of values, skills and experience needed for individuals taking on the role, and reducing caseloads to allow the time and space needed to build meaningful relationships and establish connections with local services. This should be supported by the creation of a continuous development framework which sets out training opportunities and progression routes, and reviewing pay and status. We estimate that regrading the role to reflect these additional skills and responsibilities to HEO level (paid around £34,000 outside of London) would cost £100m before training costs with existing work coach numbers. (IPPR analysis using DWP 2022 and Martin 2023)

Recommendation: The work coach role should be professionalised, with a review of responsibilities and skills informing a commensurate shift in pay.

The work coach role should be re-graded from EO to HEO, with a commensurate rise for JCP managers, with an estimated cost of £100 million. DWP should run a recruitment drive to scale up provision and attract new candidates to this reformed role.

Previous research has suggested that existing employment support infrastructure is under-utilised as a route to driving improvements in job quality and flexibility through direct engagement with employers (Jones and Carson 2023, Colechin 2017). Work coaches and employment support providers could work with local employers provide more in-depth support, and to influence the quality of roles available locally. This could involve the following.

- Job carving: re-designing roles to meet individual needs and skills.
- Negotiating flexible working arrangements.
- Identifying workplace adjustments or support.
- Signposting to resources on inclusive practices or accreditations like Disability Confident, Investors in People, or local employment charters.
- Signposting to management training.
- Challenging and advising where employers who list jobs with insecure terms and conditions.

Recommendation: Work coaches should hold a responsibility for engaging with local employers to shape secure, good quality work within their local communities

2. FACILITATING PERSON-CENTRED SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUALS ON UNIVERSAL CREDIT THROUGH LIMITING CONDITIONALITY

Services should be designed to develop and build on personal aspirations. This presents a seismic shift towards a more balanced power dynamic.

As a first step to enable this change, the emphasis on conditionality should be dialled down through the introduction of a warning system, so that individuals do not receive a financial penalty the first time that a requirement is not met.

Recommendation: As a first step to reducing the focus on conditionality, replace the first sanction with a 'yellow card' warning

Live DWP trials are exploring the potential of voluntary support for disabled people.

VOLUNTARY ENGAGEMENT IN DWP EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

In 2021, DWP launched 'tailoring up', a new approach to engagement for people on universal credit who have a health condition as part of a broader 'Health Model Office' trial in 11 jobcentres. This takes a 'voluntary first' approach, with commitments 'built up' over time.

Through the spring budget 2023, the chancellor announced funding for a new **universal support programme**, which will offer 12 months of support on a voluntary basis for up to 50,000 people with health conditions on universal credit (DWP 2023c).

This year has also seen investment in **individual placement and support**, another voluntary approach involving close integration with health services that has been particularly effective at supporting individuals with complex mental health problems or a learning difficulty towards work through a 'place then train' approach (DWP 2023i).

This recognises that some people face complex barriers to entering and staying in work and are disproportionately negatively affected by conditionality. Employment support should be wholly voluntary for individuals in these circumstances.

Recommendation: People with health conditions, single parents and parents of young children on universal credit should be exempt from requirements or financial penalties under any circumstances.

The application process for universal credit be reviewed to enable straightforward identification of individuals who should be exempted from conditionality.

Secondly, it means shifting to conditionality as a back-stop for other people getting universal credit who are closer to work. This should involve trialling an initial three to six month period of voluntary engagement with employment support services. Individuals starting a universal credit claim may be navigating a transition in their lives. This would allow sufficient time for people at this stage to build a working relationship with their employment support adviser, and jointly develop a plan that reflects their needs and circumstances. Work coaches should take a lead in reaching out to people they support, soliciting feedback and reviewing progress on agreed actions.

Limited engagement should prompt a discussion about alternative approaches, such as a change in work coach, meeting format or frequency. If alternatives have

been exhausted, an initial warning should be shared presenting the possibility of a reduction in financial support, followed by a sanction as a last resort.

Recommendation: For all other groups, a reduction in financial support should only be applied as a last resort, where successive attempts at engagement and support have broken down.

3. DEVOLVE AND CO-PRODUCE SUPPORT WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY GROUPS

Devolved decision-making increases the potential for co-design and co-production, and for developing specific services in response to local need as illustrated by the case study below

THE CONNECTING COMMUNITIES SERVICE

Commissioned by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) to build social networks to support steps towards employment, and to increase employment among disadvantaged people through collaborating with local employers.

WMCA worked closely with local authorities in commissioning, which allowed for highly localised, innovative partnership models to be developed according to the needs of local communities (Bramley et al 2022). This service reached a highly diverse group, including large numbers of people who were further away from work.

While impact was affected by the pandemic, 41 per cent of out of work participants entered sustained employment through the programme, the evaluation found that these outcomes were strongly associated with 'job matching' where individuals who had been supported to find opportunities that aligned with their skills and experience.

Local authorities already hold experience in commissioning employment support services, with many developing support for individuals further away from the labour market which sit alongside an array of provision funded by DWP and NHS trusts.

Jobcentres are currently managed at a local 'district' level, which does not align with geographies of local government. There is a risk that this partial approach to devolution is adding complexity to the system, limiting the potential for integration between services within local communities.

To address this, a greater degree of planning and delivery of employment support should be devolved to local areas, starting in places with established responsibilities for adult skills.

Local government and DWP should commission charities, careers services and health services to jointly develop support, working alongside individuals with lived experience, and establishing a local network of employment and training support.

Recommendation: Government should devolve commissioning responsibility for employment support, management of jobcentres and the adult education budget to the devolved nations, all combined authorities and to London.

Recommendation: In other areas, government should pilot alternative approaches to de-centralised commissioning with local authorities, building from on the universal support model. This could take place at a variable pace across the UK, reflecting varying levels of capacity and experience in devolution across local government.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF DWP IN A SYSTEM MORE GROUNDED IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

There are some areas where central government co-ordination could be particularly valuable in scaling up and driving improvements in provision.

Delivery: Under the model proposed through this paper, DWP would retain design and delivery of jobcentres outside of devolved areas, and there would be no change to the role DWP plays now in administering applications, assessment and payment of universal credit.

Commissioning: For other local authorities, DWP could play a valuable role in working to gradually phase in increased localised decision-making where capacity allows, and to continue to take a lead in commissioning support in other areas. For some services, e.g. digital-led trials, DWP could facilitate co-commissioning across larger geographies.

Monitoring quality and sharing best practice: DWP holds extensive experience and expertise in commissioning and delivering employment support. This should be considered a valuable asset in the context of scaling up commissioned support, with DWP collating evidence about what works, upholding strong standards of design and delivery in partnership with local government, and sharing best practice between local areas.

4. INVEST IN A RANGE OF SPECIALIST SUPPORT FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

NHS trusts and public health services are increasingly engaging in in commissioning and delivering closer to employment.

Alongside individual placement and support (IPS) models, which have been found to be particularly effective at supporting individuals with a mental health problem or learning disability, there is a need for a broader range of offers of employment support for disabled people and individuals with health conditions.

Recommendation: In the short term, DWP should rapidly accelerate delivery of universal support as a voluntary offer for employment support for disabled people.

Recommendation: In all areas, commissioners should be allocated funds to re-design and expand specialist voluntary provision for disabled people in and out of work that is not restricted to those receiving universal credit.

- Commissioners should rapidly expand the Work and Health programme, commissioning more specialist support for disabled people and people living with health conditions
- DWP and DHSC should co-commission specialist occupational health provision targeted towards people at risk of leaving work, or who are facing challenges re-entering work

5. INTEGRATE INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY WITH A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO EMPLOYMENT POLICY TO DELIVER GOOD QUALITY, INCLUSIVE WORK

The UK economy has been stuck in a low growth, low productivity trap. Many employers are struggling with skill and labour shortages, but employer investment in training is low, and many, particularly small employers, face real barriers to engaging in our apprenticeships, skills and employment support systems.

Other countries are laying the groundwork for growth in sectors where demand for skills is growing, including renewable energy, and health and care. Without decisive action to seize these opportunities, we risk being left behind.

In the US, the recent Inflation Reduction Act serves demonstrates the role of government investment in catalysing improvements in job quality within sectors. This legislation stipulates that industries accessing specific federal funds must meet criteria on pay, union engagement, and apprenticeships (The White House 2022).

Recommendation: Government should develop an ambitious industrial strategy which is integrated with employment policy

This should include conditions attached to government investment related to developing opportunities for work and training for individuals further from the labour market. and set out a comprehensive offer of support for individuals looking to enter in to and develop skills for tomorrow's sectors, along with support employers within those industries to grow and invest in workforce skills.

In turn, government should attach conditions to investment in the private sector – particularly plans accelerate progress towards the net zero carbon ambition – should be accompanied by an expectation that employers will:

- engage with employment support services, skills providers and government initiatives to embed inclusive and flexible employment practices, such as the higher levels of Disability Confident, a government accreditation aiming to encourage more inclusive working practices
- develop entry-level roles which embed flexible working and include clear routes to progression. This should include, but not be limited to, apprenticeships and traineeships as well as engaging in Sector Based Work Academies.

Within local areas, coordination between local government and other stakeholders will be increasingly important. The growing use of local hubs as a model to facilitate integration between local services may provide a valuable template for this, but crucially integration should also be embedded at a strategic leadership level.

Recommendation: Additional resource should be provided to support training and placement opportunities in key growth sectors such as renewable energy.

Local government, skills providers, careers services, employers and DWP should use Local Skills Improvement Plans to coordinate services around key priority communities and sectors and develop joint offers of funded job-relevant training, work experience and volunteering opportunities in priority sectors.

6. BREAK DOWN BARRIERS TO WORK AND TRAINING

Evidence underscores that low levels of income replacement in our social security system are themselves presenting a barrier to work. While universal credit was designed to ensure that work pays, it remains the case that many people on low incomes are not meaningfully better off in work. There is a clear case for targeted changes in universal credit to strengthen work incentives.

Recommendation: DWP should strengthen work incentives in universal credit so that individuals are always meaningfully better off in work.

- Increasing work allowances, and introducing a second earner work allowance so that individuals are always meaningfully better off in work.
- Increasing the standard allowance to help meet essential living costs the costs of finding and starting work, and to free up mental bandwidth for individuals on low incomes.
- Extending the Train and Progress programme to people to participate in work-relevant training courses that increase scope of moving in to work for up to six months.
- Ensuring that plans to replace the work capability assessment with the personal independence payment assessment end the risk working or taking steps towards employment could trigger suspension of the health-related element within universal credit.

An additional area where government leadership could play a valuable role is through strengthening incentives for employers to offer placement and training opportunities, through tax incentives or wage subsidies.

International evidence supports targeted use of employer incentives to stimulate investment in learning and development in some circumstances (OECD 2021). While they may have played a valuable role through the immediate response to economic crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a need for careful targeting outside of these shocks.

The apprenticeship levy as currently defined is too narrow in scope, and there may well be valuable in more flexible funding which could be used to meet wage costs for staff in training. There would be value in testing other incentives, such as support towards meeting indirect training costs faced by employers, including staff covering individuals on training courses.

Recommendation: Government should trial targeted use of wage subsidies and tax incentives to catalyse investment in skills within priority sectors identified through the industrial strategy.

7. INVEST IN DIGITAL APPROACHES TO SUPPORT

A full offer of employment for individuals in and out of work across the UK will need to reach thousands of people who have had no previous engagement with jobcentres or other employment support services. Targeting resource to test a range of digital offers of support would be a valuable route to learn more about what works in reaching these groups. This could include, for example:

- an offer of short, intensive 1:1 support for individuals looking to re-skill and change careers
- online peer support among individuals with shared experiences living in different parts of the country
- signposting, self-referral and application for more intensive training and support.

Recommendation: DWP should launch a series of trials of digital employment and training support.

This should be targeted towards groups who are not currently accessing support through jobcentres or contracted provision.

8. IMPROVE SERVICE QUALITY AND EMBED ACCOUNTABILITY

The DWP has faced criticism for limiting publications of evidence about service performance. At the time of writing, there has been one release of data on the Restart scheme which was introduced in 2021, and there is no external resource allocated to inspecting or supporting service improvement in Jobcentres or commissioned employment support.

Recommendation: DWP should conduct a survey to build evidence about job outcomes among people who leave universal credit including pay, conditions and scope for progression.

Ongoing learning and embedding lessons from previous programmes will be essential to ensuring progress towards relational, person centred support.

The public employment service should include comprehensive routes for people accessing support, local employers and wider community stakeholders to provide feedback on service delivery. This could build on models used in other public services, such as patient reported outcome measures in the NHS (NHS Digital 2023).

Recommendation: DWP should embed a new approach to measuring the impact of its services which takes account of user feedback, work coach relationships, job quality, pay and longevity, as well as alignment with individual needs.

Alongside measuring job outcomes, commissioners and providers should use evaluation and audit to measure:

- the quality of relationship between providers and people using services, for example using an established measurement tool, such as ‘Working Alliance’ (Graßmann et al 2020)
- the extent to which jobs outcomes meet individual needs and preferences, and fit with personal circumstances and caring responsibilities
- the quality and security of jobs that services are supporting individuals to access
- earnings for individuals who have ended their universal credit claim, through monitoring PAYE data.

Recommendation: DWP and locally commissioned employment services should be externally inspected, with findings and outcomes data published regularly.

9. STRENGTHEN EMPLOYMENT LAW TO RAISE THE FLOOR OF WORKING STANDARDS

The UK labour market is characterised by persistently high levels of insecure work. To break away from that, and ensure employment services support people into secure, good quality work, there is a need for comprehensive legislative change to raise the floor of working standards.

Recommendation: Government should deliver an Employment Bill.

This legislation should strengthen rights and protections and deliver on plans to improve enforcement and compliance.

- Establish the planned Single Enforcement Body to ensure greater compliance with employment legislation.
- Introduce a right to work flexibly, with limited and specific exceptions.
- Clarify employment status to limit bogus self-employment.
- End use of zero-hour contracts.
- Give all workers an entitlement to sick pay.

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