

Homeless people's experiences of welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions

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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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Foreword

At Crisis we know from our services that supporting people into work is crucial to help individuals move on permanently from homelessness. However, over recent years we've been increasingly concerned that sanctions, rather than helping people secure employment, may instead be pushing them further from the labour market. Yet there has been little in the way of robust evidence examining the impact on homeless people.

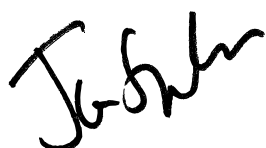
This report fills that major gap in the evidence. It is the largest study of its kind ever carried out, drawing on the experiences of 1,000 people using homelessness services across the country.

The report identifies an overwhelming motivation to work amongst homeless people and those at risk of homelessness, despite having high support needs, alongside widespread support for the principle of conditionality in the benefits system. It shows that in order to help homeless people secure employment, it is vital to capitalise on this aspiration and goodwill, but that sadly in practice this often doesn't happen and sanctions are imposed instead. Worryingly, the most vulnerable within this cohort— including care leavers and those with mental health problems— are at the greatest risk of being sanctioned.

The report also identifies serious failings in the support provided to vulnerable jobseekers by Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers. The findings suggest that people are being sanctioned because they cannot comply with conditionality requirements and not because they will not comply. Too often unreasonable demands are being placed of them because their needs and circumstances are being overlooked.

Some of the findings are shocking. They paint a grim picture of people being made homeless and even being forced to sleep rough as a result of benefit sanctions. The report finds those already homeless going hungry and being forced to 'beg, borrow and steal' – this is both inhumane and counter-productive.

Finding and sustaining work is a key route out of homelessness. This report provides clear evidence that the current system needs reform to ensure homeless people are adequately supported into work. As the current Work Programme contracts draw to a close, we want to see Government make a firm commitment to identify and help homeless people and those at risk of homelessness from an early stage, across all statutory employment support services. We hope the Government will use the evidence in this report to ensure that homeless people are able to secure employment and rebuild their lives.



Jon Sparkes
Chief Executive, Crisis

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 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.

1. Introduction

In 2012 the Coalition Government introduced a new system of welfare conditionality and sanctions that places greater responsibilities on a wider range of claimants and sanctions more harshly for failure to comply. There has been growing concern in the homelessness sector about the impact of this new regime on homeless people and evidence has begun to emerge that homeless and other vulnerable groups may be disproportionately affected by sanctions. This has raised questions about whether the new regime is being fairly and appropriately applied.

Responding to these questions and concerns, Crisis commissioned a team from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University, in conjunction with Qa Research, to conduct a study exploring the experience and prevalence of sanctions amongst homeless people. The first output from the study - a scoping paper reviewing official statistics and evidence about sanctions and homelessness was published in March 2015. This report represents the second output from the study, detailing the results from a survey of 1,013 homelessness service users and in-depth interviews with 42 homelessness service users who have been sanctioned. The results raise some serious questions about the appropriateness, effectiveness, and consequences of conditionality and sanctions as applied to homeless people.

1.1 Policy context¹

Conditionality, backed by sanctions, has been a feature of the British social security system since the late 1980s. However, in 2010, the incoming Coalition Government pressed ahead with plans set in train by the previous Labour administration for a

programme of welfare reform that placed conditionality and responsibility at the heart of welfare policy. As part of these reforms a new, harsher conditionality and sanctions regime was introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

Underpinned by the view that rights must be balanced by responsibilities, and that no one should get ‘something for nothing’, the core objective of welfare reform generally, and the sanctions regime specifically, is to support more people into work - or, in the words of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions ‘*to get Britain working again.*’² 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 as Lord Freud, now Minister for Welfare Reform, explained in a speech in December 2011:

*That’s what the welfare revolution is all about - that’s the final goal - to bring an end to long-term benefit dependency and begin a cultural transformation.*³

Other associated changes in the benefit system include: the requirement on lone parents to actively seek work once their youngest child reaches the age of five and some conditionality imposed on those receiving certain sickness benefits, for whom receipt of benefit has previously been unconditional.

1.2 Overview of the current sanctions regime

There are myriad of welfare benefits in the UK but for the purposes of this report we need only focus on the two main ‘out of work’ benefits for working age adults:⁴ Job Seeker’s Allowance (JSA) for people who are

¹ See the scoping report from this study for a fuller discussion of the policy context, which can be found here http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Sanctions%20Report%202015_FINAL.pdf

² Speech delivered by Iain Duncan Smith on 7 April 2014, Hosted by Business for Britain at Pimlico Plumbers, London <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/jobs-and-welfare-reform-getting-britain-working>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-welfare-revolution>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-welfare-revolution>

fit for work, and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) for those not fit for work. ESA claimants go through an assessment phase which includes a 'Work Capability Assessment' and are placed into one of two categories: the 'Work-Related Activity Group' (WRAG), for people assessed as capable of taking steps towards moving into work; and the Support Group for those deemed incapable of 'work-related activity'.⁵ Receipt of benefits is unconditional for those in the ESA Support Group or assessment phase but JSA claimants and ESA claimants in the WRAG have to comply with certain conditions in order to receive their benefit. If they fail to do so they can be sanctioned by having their benefit withdrawn.

JSA claimants are subject to much higher levels of conditionality than those in the ESA WRAG, with an expectation that claimants undertake *'such steps as he can reasonably be expected to have to take in order to have the best prospects of securing employment'*.⁶ ESA claimants in the WRAG are subject to lower levels of conditionality but are required to participate in mandatory interviews or undertake specified work related activity.

Conditionality requirements on JSA and ESA WRAG claimants have increased markedly in the past few years. A key component of the increased conditionality is the new 'Claimant Commitment', a personalised document which sets out the specific requirements that a claimant must meet in order to receive their benefit. The Claimant Commitment can specify the number of jobs a claimant must apply for each week and the number of hours they must spend job searching⁷, and specify courses or training they must attend. This may include referral to the Work Programme (a 'welfare-to-work' programme that is contracted out to external providers to deliver

training, assistance and work experience) for JSA claimants and for ESA WRAG claimants if they have a prognosis of being ready to work within the year.

Sanctions (i.e. withdrawal of benefit) may be imposed if a claimant fails to meet their conditionality requirements. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced a marked increase in the severity and the length of sanctions than can be imposed. Most notable of the changes are:

- Reorganisation of the previous system of sanctions and disentitlements into three categories of sanction (higher, intermediate and lower) depending on the nature of the 'failure'
- The introduction of different levels of sanctions for first, second, and third 'failures' with the penalty increasing with each 'failure'
- A marked increase in the severity of sanctions. JSA claimants can be sanctioned for between four and 13 weeks for the first failure and up to three years for the third. ESA WRAG claimants receive an open-ended sanction followed by a fixed period sanction of one week, two weeks or four weeks when they re-comply.

No claimant group subject to conditionality is exempt from sanctions. However, in July 2013 new rules were introduced giving Jobcentre Plus advisors discretionary power to exempt some homeless claimants from requirements to be available for work, actively seeking work, or to participate in the Work Programme. This 'easement' can be applied to homeless people in a 'domestic emergency', providing they are taking reasonable action to find accommodation.⁸

⁵ Although it is possible to be in part time work and claim JSA.

⁶ ESA claimants, along with a range of other working age benefits are gradually being subsumed with a new benefit: 'Universal Credit' (UC). However, the implementation of UC has been a slow process, and so, although some unemployed claimants have moved onto UC, it still makes sense to talk about JSA and ESA. The conditionality requirements and sanctions regime under discussion here are in line with those for UC.

⁷ Section 7 of the Jobseekers Act 1995: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1995/18/section/7>

⁸ These conditions would only be imposed on JSA claimants as ESA claimants are not expected to actively seek work.

If a claimant disagrees with the sanction they can ask for it to be ‘reconsidered’ by a Decision Maker. If the decision to apply the sanction is upheld the claimant can then appeal to Her Majesty’s Court and Tribunal Service (HMCTS). Since October 2013 mandatory reconsideration takes place for any claimant who disputes a decision before it can be appealed at tribunal.

There are a few features of the conditionality and sanctions system emphasised by the Government that are worth noting, for these indicate how the system is intended to operate:

- According to the Government, sanctions are intended to encourage compliance. In other words, they are intended to be a deterrent threat rather than a punishment.
- The guidance is clear that requirements for all claimants must be *‘reasonable, designed to help the claimant move into work, and reflecting the claimant’s particular capability and circumstances’*⁹
- Sanctions (i.e. withdrawal of benefit) may be imposed if a claimant fails to meet their conditionality requirements, but only if they have done so without good reason. In other words, sanctions should only be imposed against those who do not, or who refuse to comply, not those who cannot comply. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made this clear when he said *‘that is why we are developing sanctions for those who refuse to play by the rules.’*¹⁰

The most recent statistics released by DWP show that in the year to March 2015 587,000 sanctions were applied to JSA claimants before reconsiderations and appeals (506,502 after) and 43,300 to ESA WRAG claimants

(33,353 after reconsiderations and appeals). This represents an average monthly sanction rate of 5.5 per cent of JSA claimants (4.7 per cent after reconsiderations and appeals). The monthly sanction rate for ESA WRAG claimants is substantially lower at 0.7 per cent before reconsideration and appeals and 0.6 per cent after.¹¹ There has been a downward trend in the number of JSA sanctions since the peak in the year ending October 2013, reflecting a fall in the number of JSA claimants as the economy continued to recover. The rate of sanctions also fell slightly compared to the previous year. The number of ESA WRAG sanctions also fell over the period.¹²

1.3 About the research

Following a scoping phase where evidence and statistics about sanctions and homelessness were reviewed, the main stage of this study was conducted between January and September 2015. Data collection focused on two key tasks: a survey of single homeless people of working age; and in-depth interviews with homeless people who are being or who have recently been sanctioned. These are detailed further below. These datasets were also supplemented with formal and informal discussions with stakeholders throughout the duration of the project including frontline workers, managers and policy officers in homelessness services and charities, in local authority Housing Benefit departments, in services working with young people and unemployed people, and housing providers.

Survey of single homeless people of working age

The survey was conducted in day centres for homeless people and in homeless hostels in 21 towns and cities in England

⁹ http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2014/1623/pdfs/ukxi_20141623_en.pdf

¹⁰ DWP (2014) Government’s response to the Independent review of the operation of Jobseeker’s Allowance sanctions validated by the Jobseekers Act 2013, London: Department for Work and Pensions.

¹¹ Speech at the Launch of ‘Universal Credit: welfare that works’, November 11th 2010, London <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/universal-credit-welfare-that-works>

¹² Webster, D. (2015) Briefing: the DWP’s JSA/ESA Sanctions Statistics Release, 12 Aug 2015. <http://www.cpag.org.uk/david-webster>

and Scotland. These were Birmingham, Bootle, Bradford, Brighton, Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Grimsby, Hull, London (boroughs of Westminster and Lambeth), Lancaster, Leamington Spa, Leeds, Leicester, Manchester, Newcastle, Perth, Rotherham, Salford, Sheffield and York. The intention was not to generate a database which could be analysed by geography - the numbers would not have been large enough to do so - but to ensure that homeless people living in different housing, demographic and geographical contexts were included, and that the sample was not skewed unduly by specific or unique conditions in certain types of places.

Screening questions were included at the start of the survey to screen out anyone who was not of 'working age' in benefit terms (i.e. aged 65 or over) or who was not eligible for benefits because of their immigration status.

People not currently homeless were eligible to participate on the basis that their use of a homelessness service indicated a recent history of homelessness, a very precarious housing situation, or threat of homelessness.

In total, 1,013 single homelessness service users aged 16-64 were surveyed face-to-face between February and April 2015. The general demographic characteristics of the sample were: 82 per cent were male and 18 per cent were female; 14 per cent were aged 25 or under, 65 per cent were aged 26 to 49 and 22 per cent were 50 or over. In total, 548 respondents (54 per cent) were subject to conditionality. All survey respondents received a £5 'thank you' payment.

In-depth interviews with single homelessness service users

Interviews were conducted with 42 homelessness service users who were currently being or had recently (within the past year or so) been sanctioned. Interviews were conducted in seven of the towns and cities in which surveying had taken place. These were: Birmingham, London,

Manchester, Sheffield, Rotherham, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Respondents were identified through the survey, or through services which had taken part in the survey.

Interviewing took place between February and June 2015, involving 35 men and seven women. Several respondents had moved between JSA and ESA (Support Group, WRAG, and those in the assessment phase), as well as not claiming at all or being on Incapacity Benefit or Income Support, and so it is difficult to provide a clear profile of the claimant group but the sample was not unduly skewed towards JSA or ESA claimants. Efforts were also made to include people of different ages, with a good spread across each age group.

The interviews were qualitative, making use of a broad topic guide rather than a structured interview schedule. Respondents were asked to talk through their experience of claiming benefits and of interacting with the benefit system, they were asked about their employment history and aspirations, or other work-related activity they were undertaking, about their housing situations and other life experiences, and about how they managed while they were sanctioned. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondent and fully transcribed and coded and analysed using NVivo. All respondents were given £15 to thank them for their time.

The research team made efforts to keep in touch with respondents who had recently been sanctioned (approximately 10 in total) to follow their experiences over time. Contact was intermittent and it proved impossible to maintain contact with everyone but it allowed the research team to gather information about some respondents' experiences over a longer timeframe.

In this report, all respondents' names have been changed with the exception of one, who asked that his real name be used.

2. Profiling labour market engagement and dispositions to work

Welfare policy is premised on the view that the majority of people should work, should be provided with support to enable them back into work, and that vulnerable individuals unable to do so should be protected. The research was therefore interested in exploring respondents' experiences of and engagement with the labour market and their attitude to work. Respondent attitudes are important because, as discussed in Chapter 1, the Government insist that sanctions are imposed on those who wilfully fail to comply with conditionality requirements, those whose 'culture of worklessness' leaves them unwilling and unmotivated to seek work.

We will see in this chapter that although most of the homelessness service users participating in this research were not employed, and many had been out of work for some time, a strong desire to work was evident, support for the principle of conditionality and sanctions was strong, a significant cohort had a recent employment history, and many were already making concerted efforts - sometimes independent from Jobcentre Plus requirements - to gain skills and employment.

2.1 Welfare benefits

Of the 1,013 people surveyed, 92 per cent were currently claiming benefits and an additional 2 per cent had claimed in the past year. These respondents were asked if they were currently claiming any of the main working age out-of-work benefits:

- 35 per cent were claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)¹³
- 56 per cent were claiming Employment

Support Allowance (ESA) comprised of:

1. 22 per cent who reported being subject to conditionality (the Work-Related Activity Group [WRAG])
2. 33 per cent who reported not being not subject to conditionality (the Support Group or those in the assessment phase)¹⁴
3. 2 per cent were currently claiming Incapacity Benefit
4. 5 per cent were currently claiming Income Support
5. 4 per cent were not currently claiming any of the above.¹⁵

Sanctions are only applied to people claiming JSA or who are in the Work-Related Activity Group of ESA. Table 2.1 compares the profile of survey respondents claiming JSA or ESA with the JSA/ESA claimant population of Great Britain. This suggests that homelessness service users are more likely to be in conditionality groups with 63 per cent subject to conditionality compared with 42 per cent of the equivalent British claimant population. A higher proportion of our survey respondents also indicated that they were in the Work-Related Activity Group of ESA than nationally. This is surprising given the relatively high levels of mental and physical ill health and substance misuse issues recorded in the homeless population.

More than half of all those surveyed (548 respondents; 54 per cent) reported being subject to conditionality requirements. These 548 respondents are the main focus

¹³ See the scoping report from this study for a fuller analysis of the official sanction statistics: http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Sanctions%20Report%202015_FINAL.pdf

¹⁴ Only five respondents, or 0.5%, of the full sample were claiming UC. For the purposes of reporting in this document the five UC respondents have been subsumed within the JSA group. At the time of publication only claimants considered fit for work were being put onto UC.

¹⁵ These categories are not mutually exclusive and a small number of respondents indicated receipt of more than one benefit.

Table 2.1. Proportion of JSA and ESA claimants

	GB claimant population, Feb 2015 (n=3,028,700) %	Survey of homelessness service users, Feb 2015 (n=867) %
JSA	26	38
ESA WRAG	16	25
ESA Support Group and assessment phase	58	37
Total	100	100

Source: Survey data and DWP Working Age Claimant Group

Table 2.2. In your opinion, does your health limit the type or amount of work you can do?

	ESA WRAG %	JSA %	All subject to conditionality %
A lot	47	15	27
Quite a bit	26	11	17
Just a little	10	12	11
Not at all	15	61	43
Don't know	1	1	1
Total	100	100	100
Base			548

of this report - people using homelessness services who are or have recently been subject to conditionality and, therefore, potentially subject to sanctions.

2.2 'Fitness' for work

Of the survey respondents claiming benefits, more than half were in receipt of sickness benefits (ESA and Incapacity Benefit) and amongst those subject to conditionality a significant proportion (39 per cent) were claiming ESA. ESA is only paid to claimants who have been assessed by DWP as not currently fit for work and so it is not surprising that a significant proportion of respondents subject to conditionality reported having a physical health problem or disability (40 per cent) or mental health issues (45 per cent).

Physical or mental ill health and disabilities do not preclude people from working. However, thinking specifically about how their health impacted on capacity to work, 44 per cent of respondents subject to conditionality said their health did limit the amount or type

of work they could do 'a lot' or 'quite a bit' (see Table 2.2). As might be expected, three quarters of ESA WRAG claimants reported health issues that limited the work that they could do by 'a lot' or 'quite a bit', but health was also a barrier to work for just over a quarter of JSA claimants. We will see later in the report that a host of other issues also affect homelessness service users' capabilities with regard to work, including their housing situation, literacy, and other support needs.

2.3 Employment history

Very few respondents were working at the time they were surveyed and, reflecting their health issues (see above), housing circumstances, and other support needs many were relatively detached from the labour market. Table 2.3 shows that only 15 respondents in the full sample were in regular paid work and that 41 per cent of the full sample and 35 per cent of those subject to conditionality last had a regular job over five years ago.

Table 2.3. Approximately when did you last have a regular job?

	Subject to conditionality %	All respondents %
I have one now	1	1
Less than 1 year ago	20	16
≥ 1 but less than 2 years ago	13	11
≥ 2 but less than 5 years ago	22	19
5 or more years	36	41
Never had a regular job	8	10
Don't know	1	1
Total	100	100
Base	548	1,013

However, a significant minority did have a recent work history, particularly amongst those subject to conditionality. One in five, for example, had worked in the past year and an additional 13 per cent had a regular job between one to two years ago. Thus, one-third of respondents subject to conditionality had worked in the past two years while more than half had worked in the past five years.

2.4 Efforts to seek work and move closer to the labour market

The vast majority of interview and survey respondents wanted to work, in some cases despite having been assessed as unfit to do so. In total, 88 per cent of all survey respondents said they wanted a job now (51 per cent) or in the future (37 per cent). This includes respondents who were not currently well enough to work, with 41 per cent of ESA WRAG claimants saying they would like a job now. A further 50 per cent said they would like a job in the future.

Interview respondents with work histories were keen to emphasise their past experience, usually to demonstrate their willingness to work and their capabilities:

I'm not a lazy person, I do my work, I can work, I was running my business all by myself from 6am in the shop cooking ready

for 12 and I'll be closing 10 in the night every day, Sunday to Sunday. (Benjamin)

I was a chef, I used to be able to jump out of one kitchen and straight into another kitchen within a couple of days so I was laughing, six months in one job and then I'll go to Newquay or go to this place or this place, jump straight into a restaurant, I used to work in [X restaurant], I ended up buying [it] when I were younger with my ex-partner when my son first were born, so I've had my own restaurants. (Ja)

Interview respondents' desire to have a job was reflected in their efforts to find work and improve their skills. Those who could work (and some of those less able) were keen to secure employment, develop their skills and undertake training to improve their position in the labour market. As Sonia and Anisa explained:

I just want to get a job so I can get out and pay my own rent...I go and ask people at the jobcentre, it's usually me asking if they've got something else for me to go. (Sonia)

I would really want to do a course cos that would at least get me doing something in the day. It's stressful cos you've got so much time on your hands. (Anisa)

Independently from requirements placed upon them by Jobcentre Plus many respondents signed up for educational and training courses, were working with voluntary sector providers to write CVs and improve their skills, and were handing out CVs and using social and familial networks to seek work. These efforts were rarely recognised by Work Coaches¹⁶ as 'counting' towards respondents' conditionality requirements - an issue we pick up in more detail in Chapter 4.

In total, 64 per cent of respondents subject to conditionality had educational or vocational qualifications leaving around one-third with no qualifications.¹⁷ Respondents were adept at identifying, and taking steps to address, educational or skills gaps disadvantaging them in the current labour market. Thus Fred, who described himself as computer illiterate, recognised that computer skills had become essential in today's labour market and signed up for a basic computer skills course. Similarly, Maggie had some previous experience in retail - work she had enjoyed and hoped to make a career of - and so completed a City and Guilds qualification in retail management in the hope of giving herself an advantage over other job applicants.

2.5 Attitudes toward conditionality

There was widespread support amongst the 42 in-depth interview respondents for the principle of conditionality, with most thinking it right that people should 'earn' any benefits they received. It is worth remembering here that all interview respondents had been sanctioned. By virtue of this, all had negative experiences of the benefit system and might be expected to be more inclined against the system of which they had fallen foul. Yet the following comments were typical:

I think they should [have conditionality] it shouldn't be free money coz everyone else is out there working and paying tax. I used to pay tax so I know what it's like. You need to put the effort, you can't just get something for free when you're not putting something back. (Kyle)

If you're on benefits you've got to do some sort of stuff to get paid or sort yourself out, cos at the end of the day it's just easy money really, if you stay on benefits any longer you're just going to get comfortable with it ain't you. Basically I'm only on JSA to find work. I don't want to be on it but I have to be on it. (David)

Yes I do agree with it, cos Joe Bloggs could just go down, make a claim, do absolutely nothing looking for work and think it's free money. So in a way to have conditions put onto people is good. (Dennis)

Hence, despite the difficulties that individuals encountered in practice (see Chapter 4), there was **general willingness to accept conditionality requirements and to make concerted efforts to meet these.**

In fact, five interview respondents potentially eligible for ESA chose to claim JSA instead, going 'above and beyond' what was expected of them in their willingness to look for a job. Stuart, for example, had been encouraged by a voluntary sector organisation to apply for ESA but decided not to do so because *'to me that's an easy way out, people would use that to get out of the situation of having to do these job searches.'* This is despite being sanctioned several times, accruing considerable rent arrears as a result and being evicted from his tenancy. Jonathan, who had been on ESA previously following a serious illness that left him with

¹⁶ All JSA and ESA claimants are assigned a Work Coach who supports them to undertake work-related activity.

¹⁷ A similar proportion of all respondents and respondents not subject to conditionality had educational or vocational qualifications.

lung damage, explained his rationale for choosing to move to JSA in similar terms:

...they have asked me why don't I go on ESA but I choose not to go on it cos I feel I'm fit for work. ESA is for somebody who really needs it, I don't need it. I meet the criteria to have it but I were on ESA before, it's too easy and you sit at home all day... At least with JSA you're active, you can go and do stuff...I want to work, I don't want to be in the situation I'm in now and be out of work. (Jonathan)

Kyle, who was discharged from the army with post-traumatic stress disorder and encouraged to apply for ESA did not wish to place limits on his search for work either, believing there was work he could do with his mental health issues and that sickness benefits should only be for those 'who really need it'. Maggie and Sonia, meanwhile, were so keen to work that they too applied for JSA despite being advised that poor health would prevent them from being able to comply with the JSA system:

My doctor said I should have gone straight on ESA but...I thought ESA I'd be stuck in the house being on the sick and I couldn't do with that at the time cos I thought it would keep my mind going so I still claimed JSA and thought I'd be all right. (Maggie)

I was getting told about ESA, workers here and workers there, and for ages they were telling me to go on the sick, before all this [sanctions] happened, and I was saying no cos I just want to get into a routine and I'm scared if I leave it longer and longer it's going to be harder and harder. (Sonia)

Respondents' interactions with Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme, and their efforts to meet conditionality requirements are discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

2.6 Key points

- 94 per cent of survey respondents were claiming benefits or had done in the past year, 35 per cent of whom were currently claiming JSA and 56 per cent of whom were currently claiming ESA.
- The survey results indicate that homeless claimants may be more likely to be in conditionality groups - JSA and ESA WRAG - than the wider claimant population. This is somewhat counter intuitive given the relatively high prevalence of issues such as mental and physical ill health and substance abuse in this population, although the predominance of men in the survey sample (who are more likely to claim JSA than women) will partly explain this.
- The survey evidence points to high levels of labour market detachment amongst homelessness service users. A significant proportion were not 'fit for work' or had health issues that limited the work they could do, and around half of the survey sample had last had a job more than five years ago, including 10 per cent who had never worked.
- However, a significant minority did have a recent work history, particularly amongst those subject to conditionality (over one-third of whom had worked regularly in the past two years) and a strong desire to work was clearly evident. In total, 88 per cent of all survey respondents said they wanted a job now or in the future, including those deemed unfit for work. This general disposition towards working was reflected in interview respondents' efforts to find work and improve their skills and employability.
- 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 recently.

3. Prevalence and reasons for sanctions

The official sanctions statistics do not include details of claimants' housing situations and so no robust data exist about the numbers of homeless people who are sanctioned. Evidence is beginning to emerge suggesting that vulnerable people, and homelessness service users in particular, may be disproportionately affected by sanctions.¹⁸ However, existing evidence is scant and sometimes anecdotal.

In response, a key aim of this study was to generate a robust estimate of the proportion of homeless people who are sanctioned though a survey of homelessness service users. The results, presented in this chapter, lend much support to the evidence already accumulating that homeless and vulnerable people are more likely to be sanctioned than the wider claimant population.

In addition to looking at the prevalence of sanctioning, this chapter draws on qualitative interviews to explore the reasons why homelessness service users are sanctioned. A series of case studies shows that respondents were rarely sanctioned for wilfully refusing to comply with conditionality requirements, an issue we explore in more detail in Chapter 4.

3.1 How many homelessness service users are sanctioned?

DWP emphasise that sanctions exist to encourage compliance. In other words, they are a deterrent threat, rather than a punishment. If effective, deterrent threats need not be used extensively. Yet evidence from this study suggests that significant numbers of homelessness service users are being sanctioned.

Of the 548 survey respondents subject to conditionality (i.e. those to whom a sanction could be applied), 39 per cent had been sanctioned in the past year (JSA 38 per cent; ESA WRAG 40 per cent). One in 10 respondents were sanctioned at the time they were surveyed (JSA 12 per cent; ESA WRAG 6 per cent). By comparison, a Freedom of Information request in the year 2013/14 revealed that 18 per cent of all JSA claimants were sanctioned in that year.¹⁹ This suggests that homelessness service users claiming JSA may be twice as likely to be sanctioned as the JSA claimant population as a whole.

A comparable annualised figure is not available for sanctions amongst ESA WRAG claimants²⁰ but the monthly sanction rate is lower than for JSA claimants. The similar sanction rate amongst ESA WRAG and JSA claimants in our survey suggests the prevalence of sanctions amongst homeless ESA WRAG claimants is greater than twice the rate of this claimant group as a whole.

The majority (60 per cent of those who had been sanctioned) had been sanctioned once in the past year but a significant proportion (around 40 per cent) had been sanctioned more than once. By comparison, a Freedom of Information request revealed that in the year to June 2014 30.9 per cent of all sanctioned JSA claimants had been sanctioned more than once suggesting that homeless claimants may be more likely to experience multiple sanctions.²¹

Consistent with the survey findings, it was common for interview respondents to have multiple sanctions imposed over the course of a year, sometimes with only short periods in between where benefit was paid.

¹⁸ See http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Sanctions%20Report%202015_FINAL.pdf for a review of the evidence about sanctions and homelessness:

¹⁹ FOI 2014-4972, found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/402593/4972-2014.pdf

²⁰ The FOI request only applied to JSA claimants. We submitted an equivalent request for ESA WRAG claimants on 27th May 2015 but at the time of writing had not received the information requested.

²¹ FOI 2014-4972, found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/402593/4972-2014.pdf

3.2 Profile of homelessness service users who are sanctioned

In terms of demographic characteristics, there were no significant differences between respondents who had been sanctioned and those who had not although, consistent with the profile of the wider sanctioned population, they were slightly younger. However, respondents sanctioned in the past year were more likely to belong to vulnerable sub-groups, than were those who had not been sanctioned. For example, amongst the sample of respondents subject to conditionality:

- Those who had been in local authority care were more likely to have been sanctioned in the past year than those who had never been in care (49 per cent and 36 per cent respectively)
- Those with mental ill health were more likely to have been sanctioned in the past year than those without mental ill health (45 per cent and 34 per cent respectively with slight but not stark differences between JSA and ESA WRAG claimants)
- JSA claimants with alcohol or drug dependency issues were more likely to have been sanctioned in the past year than those without (47 per cent compared with 33 per cent), although the same was not true for ESA WRAG claimants.

3.3 Why are homelessness service users sanctioned?

Amongst survey respondents subject to conditionality the most common reasons for a sanction were:

- Not signing on (28 per cent of JSA claimants)²²
- Not turning up for a work-focused interview (20 per cent, with little difference between JSA and ESA WRAG claimants);

with a further 8 per cent of sanctioned JSA claimants and 7 per cent of sanctioned ESA WRAG claimants sanctioned for being late for an appointment, a work-focused interview or to sign on

- Not doing the required job search activity (19 per cent of JSA claimants).

However, these broad statistics reveal nothing about the circumstances in which respondents breached their Claimant Commitment; failed to attend appointments, were late, or not active enough in their job search. We do know that **82 per cent of sanctioned survey respondents felt they had a good reason for failing to meet the condition for which they were sanctioned.** If we look in detail at the circumstances under which respondents interviewed in-depth were sanctioned, this rather high percentage begins to make sense. A summary of the reasons why each in-depth interview respondent was sanctioned is presented Appendix 1 and Box 3.1 presents five of these cases in more detail. In a small number of cases respondents were not clear why they were sanctioned, or the circumstances were so convoluted it was difficult to ascertain with clarity or certainty the reason for their sanction. In 36 of the 42 cases, however, it was possible to discern the circumstances under which respondents were sanctioned. Exploring the circumstances resulting in these 36 respondents being sanctioned, most fell into one of five categories:

1. **Impossible to comply:** for example not receiving notification of an appointment, or being ill or in hospital. A total of six of the 36 interview respondents reported not receiving the letters that informed them of appointments they were subsequently sanctioned for missing. A further three were too ill to attend their appointment, one of whom (Luke) was in hospital at the time. Helena meanwhile, could not attend

her appointment because the information about the location was missing from her letter. She requested this information and the letter was sent again without the relevant details.

2. Making an impossible choice:

for example having another crucial appointment or commitment at the same time as a Jobcentre Plus or Work Programme appointment. Lewis, for example, had a job interview that clashed with his appointment, and Fred had to look after his daughter at short notice. Melanie was being evicted from a hostel on her signing date. Respondents in these situations usually made efforts to contact their advisor in advance or as soon as possible to explain their predicament.

3. Oversight and misunderstanding:

for example making an honest mistake about the time or date of an appointment or misunderstanding conditions and requirements. Eight respondents could be placed in this category. Anisa and Ross made innocent mistakes about the time or location of their appointments while Kyle and Thomas simply forgot theirs. Brian, Pete, Alistair and Simon all misunderstood (or, perhaps, in the case of Brian were misinformed about) their obligations, in the case of Simon and Pete because of numeracy and literacy difficulties. These 'mistakes' were often made in an otherwise unblemished record and sometimes because other distracting personal issues had arisen (family bereavement, relationship and housing problems). Respondents nearly always contacted Jobcentre Plus or the Work Programme as soon as they realised their mistake.

4. Support needs such as mental ill health, learning disability or drug and alcohol problems limiting capacity to comply:

for example, as in William's case, where requirements were clearly not appropriate to his circumstances and capabilities. This

was also true for Tim and Shawn and would apply to Maggie's second sanction. Tim and Maggie were subsequently deemed unfit for work and awarded ESA. We have already mentioned above that Simon and Pete found compliance difficult because of poor literacy and numeracy.

5. Refusing to engage in work-related activity:

only two respondents fell clearly into this category. Joe had support needs that limited his capabilities but (in contrast to others such as Tim and Shawn mentioned above) Joe made no effort to seek work. It is worth noting that Joe was subsequently deemed unfit for work and awarded ESA. Amrit refused to attend the Work Programme despite being capable of doing so.

In addition, there is a relatively large group of respondents who had actively sought work but could not prove they had done so, or who had done so in a way not endorsed by their Work Coach. Graham, for example, was sanctioned (twice) for failing to apply for the requisite number of jobs. He had, in fact, applied for enough jobs each time to meet his Claimant Commitment but:

...you've got Universal Jobmatch on the computer and they can tell on the computer how many jobs you've applied for and I told her I'd applied for jobs in other areas, Jobs.com, other things and she said that wasn't enough. So that's how I got sanctioned. (Graham)

Stuart had faced similar problems because his efforts were not recorded online:

...it's not good enough [recording job-search efforts] on paper for them, I'm not too good on the computer, I explained to them that, I'm not the best, I've tried to get some help with it but to them it's not good enough, they literally sanction you, that's what it's like. (Stuart)

Jonathan and Adam, whose experiences are detailed further in Chapter 4, were both very actively seeking work in the industries in which they had experience and were applying for the requisite number of jobs each week. But they had not done so according to the specific requirements of their Claimant Commitment and were sanctioned. Adam was an experienced commis chef and knew that the best way to secure employment in that trade was to hand out CVs in person but his Work Coach insisted he applied for jobs online only. He was sanctioned for not

seeking work in this way, despite keeping detailed records of his activity:

Yeah [I recorded] the date I'd looked for it, the site I'd used and if they got back to me and where I'd handed it [CV] out or whatever and they still weren't happy with that, the whole thing was filled out and they didn't agree with me not doing Universal Jobmatch. (Adam)

Jonathan was sanctioned for applying for 'the wrong' job; jobs that were not specified on

Box 3.1 Detailed reasons for sanctions: case studies

William has borderline learning difficulties, mental ill health (schizophrenia, anxiety and paranoia), poor computer literacy, has a support worker and has recently served a three year prison sentence. On release he was advised to claim JSA and was instructed to apply for 15 jobs per week. William made every effort to meet his requirements - '*I pushed everything out of the way just to meet the target, like going and seeing my kids and everything like that, just to get to the target*' - but he could not apply for enough jobs and was sanctioned. A couple of months later William made a successful claim for ESA and was placed in the Support Group (i.e. recognised as not capable of work-related activity).

David was sanctioned for four weeks for failing to attend an appointment at the Jobcentre. David did not receive the letter informing him of his appointment. At the time, David was using a day centre as a postal address and was checking his post regularly. He received other letters but nothing from the Jobcentre until the letter arrived informing him that he had been sanctioned. **Ja** had a similar experience and was sanctioned twice for failing to attend appointments for which he had received no notification. Unlike David, Ja was housed and living alone at the time so there is no particular reason why his post failed to reach him.

Anisa was sanctioned for failing to sign on. She had been on JSA for some time but had moved to a different area and so had to make a fresh claim. At the very start of her new claim she was asked to attend a group meeting (on a Thursday) and was told that her signing on day was a Friday. She assumed

her first signing date would be the following week - her previous experience was that a first signing date is usually a week or two after your claim starts - and did not check the appointment card they gave her. In fact, she was due to sign the very next day. As soon as she realised her mistake she contacted Jobcentre Plus but was told she did not have a valid reason. Anisa had an otherwise perfect record of compliance.

Lewis secured a job interview while on the Work Programme and informed his Work Programme Provider that he would not be in on the day of his interview. When he received no benefit payment he enquired as to why and was told he had been sanctioned for failure to attend the Work Programme. When he spoke again to his Work Programme Provider he was told he should also have informed Jobcentre Plus. He had not been told this at the time. Lewis' Work Programme Provider and his Work Coach agreed that he had a good reason but his Work Programme Provider insisted that despite this, he had no choice but to record Lewis as a 'failure to attend' and his Work Coach insisted that, having been recorded in this way, he had no choice but to sanction Lewis. Lewis asked for reconsideration and his sanction was then overturned.

Ross went to the wrong office for an appointment. It is not clear how this mistake occurred but he explained what happened next:

'I'm trying to ring me advisor and tell them that I've been to the place they asked me to go and they've said that I haven't got an appointment there and my appointment must be in Manchester city, so I went there [city centre] and when I got there it was too late and after that it was sanction upon sanction'.

his Claimant Commitment (as we will see in Chapter 4, Jonathan had not been allowed to specify jobs for which he was most qualified on his Claimant Commitment):

The reason they gave me was I weren't being practical in what I were looking for... cos I were looking for racing jobs and I did put that in there [booklet recording job search] and he looked at it and said 'it's not in your agreement to look for that, you have to look for warehouse, factory, telesales' ... and he said 'I've got to send it to a decision maker to see if you're going to be sanctioned' it took them less than an hour and they rang me on my mobile and said I was sanctioned. (Jonathan)

The case studies and examples presented in this chapter hint at a host of challenges and barriers encountered by homelessness service users meeting conditionality. Implicit in some of their stories are practical barriers associated with the requirement for internet-based job searches, for example, or the lack of a secure postal address, and it is clear that homelessness service users' personal circumstances and support needs can render the level of conditionality placed upon them, or the specifics of these requirements, inappropriate. We look at these barriers and challenges in more detail in Chapter 4 where we broaden out the focus of discussion to claimants' wider experiences of setting and meeting conditionality requirements and of the help and support offered through the current benefits system.

3.4 Key points

- 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, those claiming JSA may be twice as likely to be sanctioned as the JSA claimant population as a whole. In total, 39 per cent of the survey sample had been sanctioned in the past year.
- Survey results indicate that it is vulnerable claimants who are most likely to be sanctioned. For example 45 per cent of respondents with mental ill health had been sanctioned in the past year compared with 34 per cent of those without.
- Respondents were very rarely sanctioned for wilfully refusing to comply with conditionality requirements, a fact reflected in the high proportion (82 per cent) reporting having a good reason for failing to meet the condition for which they were sanctioned. Rather, they made honest mistakes, they had not received notification of appointments, were ill, or were set conditions that were clearly not appropriate to their capabilities.
- These results have significant implications for policy, indicating as they do that sanctions are not being used just as a deterrent threat, or being imposed only on those 'refusing to play by the rules'.

4. Homelessness service users' experiences of conditionality

In the previous chapter we saw that a very high proportion (39 per cent) of homelessness service users had been sanctioned. We have also seen that there is strong support for a system of conditionality amongst this population group and that the majority are keen to work and develop skills to bring them closer to the labour market (Chapter 2). These two facts are somewhat incongruent. Why would so many homelessness claimants not comply with conditionality requirements, if they are motivated to improve their standing in the labour market and support the obligation to do so in return for receipt of benefits? In this chapter we explore respondents' experiences of attempting to meet conditionality requirements. In doing so, an answer to this question begins to emerge: that homelessness service users' efforts are severely hampered by systemic and personal barriers to compliance.

4.1 Setting conditionality requirements

In the main, the 42 in-depth interview respondents had found the process of applying for JSA or ESA straightforward, with few problems highlighted. The process of drawing up and agreeing the Claimant Commitment was also reported to be straightforward.

The Claimant Commitment is a personalised document setting out claimants' responsibilities in relation to their receipt of JSA, ESA or Universal Credit (UC) and is drawn up in a meeting between the claimant and their Work Coach. DWP guidance explains that it 'is generated as a result of a conversation with the claimant.'²³

Although the process of agreeing Claimant Commitments was straightforward, few respondents recognised it as the product of a conversation. They did describe discussion between themselves and their advisors - for example several reported being asked what type of work they hoped to secure - but most thought the purpose of the meeting was to be 'told' their conditions. Andy and David make this clear:

'[the advisor] just went 'you've got to apply for 32 jobs and you've got to look for 35 hours a week', that's what they said to me, that was it, I signed this piece of paper 'come back next Tuesday at 20 to 10' that was it [Interviewer: So how did it come about that you were told that you had to apply for 32 jobs?] Cos the advisor told me this is what you've got to do. (Andy)

I've got to look [apply] for nine jobs a week and I've got to spend 20 hours on the computer every week looking for jobs and in newspapers and stuff...I've got no choice basically, that's what they've give me. [So you couldn't discuss that with them?] No that's what the agreement was on the job seekers anyway...I didn't think I had a choice really. (David)

Those who were unhappy with the terms of their Claimant Commitment rarely tried to negotiate, believing they had no choice. William, for example, considered his commitment to apply for 15 jobs per week unreasonable in light of his circumstances but felt unable to express his concerns, explaining that 'I just wanted to do what they said so I didn't get sanctioned'. Gerry, meanwhile, assumed that the Claimant Commitment was a standard agreement that

²³ See, for example https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/288098/admu3.pdf and https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/404215/uc-and-your-claimant-commitment.pdf

all claimants were required to sign:

...it were like a set agreement that everyone had, there were no ifs or buts, that's what you had to do. (Gerry)

Some interview respondents felt the requirements set out in their Claimant Commitment were reasonable and appropriate to their capabilities. Many, however, did not.²⁴ In detailed discussions with respondents, three particular issues emerged:

Firstly, some advisors used what appeared to be the 'one size fits all' approach to setting job search requirements, without fully taking account of individuals' skills and qualifications, experience of their trade, or preferences. This point is illustrated by two case studies presented in Box 4.1. In the first, Jonathan's experience as a qualified racing horse handler exemplifies the lack of consideration given to claimants' skills; in the second we see no flexibility in the Work Coach's requirement to seek jobs online.

Secondly, there was evidence of Work Coaches failing to acknowledge and account for the limitations on respondents' job search capability, particularly in relation to the number of jobs respondents were required to apply for and the number of hours they were expected to spend job searching.

We discuss this issue in more detail when we come to look at the specific barriers homelessness service users face meeting conditionality requirements. For now we can note that it was common for respondents to be required to apply for 15-20 jobs per week, often online, including people who were rough sleeping, with no internet access, no qualifications and with additional support needs likely to make job searching more

difficult (e.g. low levels of literacy or computer literacy; and mental health issues).

DWP policy and guidance is very clear that 'any work-related requirements placed on claimants should be personalised according to their needs and circumstances, taking into account any restrictions.' And that they should be '*reasonable...reflecting the claimant's particular capability and circumstances*'.²⁵ Potential limitations faced by people as a result of their housing circumstances should be taken into account when drafting the Claimant Commitment.²⁶

In practice, however, it was common for interview respondents to report job search requirements they felt were unreasonable or impossible to meet given their circumstances and Work Coaches who seemed uninterested in gathering information about their capabilities. This was Jonathan's experience. When asked whether his Work Coach had enquired about his circumstances, he replied:

No, not interested in any of it, all they want to know is whether you've been looking for jobs, that were all he were ever interested in. At the time we were experiencing problems with the accommodation we were in, I tried explaining that, he weren't interested. (Jonathan)

Thus, although most respondents supported the principle of conditionality (see Chapter 2.5), their support was not unconditional. They supported a system that set reasonable and fair requirements according to circumstances and capability. Respondents were not convinced the current regime met this requirement:

Well it is reasonable. I get where they're [Government] coming from. They don't

²⁴ All interview respondents had been sanctioned at some point in the past year, making it more likely that they would raise concerns about their conditions.

²⁵ DWP (2014) Government's response to the Independent review of the operation of Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions validated by the Jobseekers Act 2013, London: Department for Work and Pensions.p6.

²⁶ See Chapter K2 of the Decision Makers guide https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/439812/admk2.pdf

want people sitting on their arse and that... It's reasonable but not 35 hours a week, that's not reasonable. I can't look for 35 hours a week. (Andy)

They have a right to ask me to do something in order to get my money, I understand this and it's not that I'm fighting against this, so if you want money in this country, give something back. The trouble is, how much is enough? (Helena)

Thirdly, practices appeared very variable, an issue we pick up further later in this chapter. One would expect each Claimant Commitment to be different - they are personal tailored documents after all - but the number of job search hours or job applications required and the method of job search allowed varied with little apparent logic. For example lower expectations were placed on some respondents with relatively stable housing and few additional support needs than on others who were sleeping rough with significant additional issues. We have already seen that some respondents (Adam, for example) were required to do all job seeking activity online despite poor computer proficiency or literacy, yet others reported that their Claimant Commitment allowed for a wide variety of activity. When asked about the terms of his Claimant Commitment, Gerry for example explained that:

You [I] have to regularly use internet, regularly check the papers, regularly ask family and friends, hand out CVs where possible where you think you might get a job and things like that. (Gerry)

We saw in Chapter 2 that most respondents were keen to work within their capabilities, to develop skills to improve their employability now or in the future, and were generally supportive of a regime of conditionality. In addition, the case studies presented in Chapter 3 show that many homelessness service users made concerted efforts to

meet the conditions set out in their Claimant Commitment. As Helena was at pains to emphasise when she said *'I have health and safety level 1, I have catering 1, what I want to show is I'm not lazy, I'm really trying to work.'*

Yet we also know that a significant proportion did not meet the terms of their Claimant Commitment and were sanctioned. Exploring in more detail respondents efforts to meet conditionality requirements provides an explanation: respondents encountered a host of problems and barriers to complying with their Claimant Commitment, despite often being willing, and trying to do so.

The majority (63 per cent) of the 548 survey respondents who were subject to conditionality reported finding the requirements placed upon them difficult to meet, rising to 79 per cent of the 213 respondents sanctioned in the past year (compared with 54 per cent of those not sanctioned). This suggests that problems and barriers to meeting conditionality requirements may explain high sanction rates, more so than unwillingness to do so. For example, Table 4.1. shows that those finding it difficult to meet requirements were:

- More likely to have been in local authority care or fostered
- More likely to have physical or mental health problems
- More likely to have experienced violence or abuse from a parent or partner
- More likely to have had drug or alcohol dependency issues
- Slightly less likely to have educational or vocational qualifications
- More detached from the labour market (i.e. more likely to have never had a job or last worked regularly more than five years ago).

Of course not all those reporting difficulties were sanctioned, and others reporting no difficulties nevertheless failed to meet their conditions. This latter group are likely to include those who were happy with the terms of their Claimant Commitment but who received no notification of a particular appointment, or made an honest mistake about the time or date (see Chapter 3 for a classification of 'reasons for sanction').

Nevertheless, it is clear from the survey results and from the detailed information provided by interview respondents that many homelessness service users face significant barriers to complying with conditionality. It is to these that we now turn.

4.2 Barriers to meeting conditionality requirements

Survey respondents reporting difficulties meeting conditions were asked to specify what had most hindered their efforts to comply. Some barriers to compliance were systemic (i.e. related to the operation of the benefit system) and others were personal (i.e. related to characteristics and circumstances of the individual) although this is not an absolute distinction: poor IT proficiency, for example, is only problematic if the benefit system demands online engagement, while the lack of a secure postal address is only problematic if letters are the principal form of communication.

The results show that the most common systemic problems were:

- Being asked to apply for too many jobs

Box 4.1. A 'one size fits all' approach to setting conditionality requirements?

Jonathan is an experienced, trained racehorse handler living in Yorkshire, which boasts more racecourses than any other region. Yet he was denied the opportunity to specify this job on his Claimant Commitment. Jonathan also felt that his advisor was mocking him, undermining the skills he had worked hard to attain. He explained:

Yeah I went for an initial discussion with them, what I want to do, and when I mentioned previously what I'd done with horse racing they just laughed at me, in their own words they said that 'wasn't realistic' I need to wake up and smell coffee, with horse racing you earn a lot more than somebody who works in a factory. I see a factory as a dead end job, it's a last resort. They asked me 'why did I waste all my time going to college and doing what I did?' And I complained about the advisor cos he actually said to me he thought horseracing was for girls.

Jonathan was told that if he applied for jobs in this field he would have to 'do it privately in my own time' and they would not 'count' towards his targets.

Adam had a similar experience, this time in relation to his method of job search. As a qualified and experienced commis chef, he is familiar with the

industry and knows that the best way to secure employment is by handing out CVs in person. He has found work many times this way. Adam explained that 'a head chef is not going to look through 500 emails, but if you just go in and speak to him and he can see you face-to-face, he's got more understanding of what you're like.' Adam is also not very IT proficient. But his advisor insisted that all his job search activity was done online through Universal Jobmatch and this was recorded on his Claimant Commitment.

I'm a chef, been a chef the last five years and I'm not into internet, computer stuff, Universal Jobmatch, so I was going to the library or using their printers and printing out CVs and I was just going into restaurants, cafes, hotels and physically giving my CV and if anything came of it phone me, but they weren't happy with that, they wanted me to do the job search on Universal [Jobmatch] and look for I think it was an hour and a half a day, I had to look for at least 30 jobs, look for and apply for.

Adam continued seeking work by distributing CVs and was sanctioned, prompting him to stop claiming JSA so he could continue searching for work in the way he felt would be most effective. He has secured a number of temporary jobs since then (by handing out CVs) but in-between relies on charities, friends and family, mostly 'sofa surfing' and sometimes sleeping rough. He continues to actively seek work.

each week (72 per cent of JSA claimants; not applicable to ESA claimants)

- Having important appointments that clashed with Jobcentre/Work Programme appointments (72 per cent)
- Difficulties getting the necessary help from Jobcentre Plus (71 per cent)
- Needing, and not having, regular access to the internet (67 per cent)
- Being given the wrong information (64 per cent cited)
- Letters not reaching the respondent/post going missing (64 per cent).

And the most common personal barriers faced were:

- Not having enough money to travel to appointments (77 per cent)
- Not having suitable/clean clothes for appointments/interviews (57 per cent)
- Having mental health issues (51 per cent).

There were stark differences between JSA and ESA WRAG claimants with regard to the personal barriers they faced. This stands in contrast to systemic difficulties which were encountered similarly by both claimant groups. Of all ESA WRAG claimants reporting problems meeting conditionality requirements:

- 77 per cent cited mental health issues (34 per cent of JSA claimants)
- 68 per cent had difficulty remembering to turn up for appointments (36 per cent of JSA claimants)
- 56 per cent cited issues with alcohol or drugs (34 per cent of JSA claimants)

- 52 per cent said they were too worried/busy trying to find somewhere to stay each day (38 per cent of JSA claimants).

We would expect higher levels of vulnerability amongst ESA claimants but conditionality requirements should be adjusted to account for this. In effect, the requirements placed on ESA WRAG claimants should be lowered to create a level playing field with JSA claimants. As a result, problems complying with requirements due to issues such as mental ill health should not be significantly higher amongst ESA WRAG claimants.

If we consider the reasons why respondents were sanctioned (see Chapter 3), and their experiences of agreeing their Claimant Commitment (see above), many of the problems cited by survey respondents come as no surprise. We have already seen, for example, that some respondents found job search targets were set unreasonably high, and that the mismatch between respondents' capabilities and their conditionality requirements explains a proportion of interview respondents' sanctions. Missing post, unclear or inaccurate communication, clashing commitments, and the requirement to job-seek online all emerged as issues in the discussion in Chapter 3. In the remainder of this section we draw on the in-depth interview data to illuminate further some of the common barriers to compliance indicated by the survey results and those which emerged as significant in interviews with sanctioned claimants.

Internet access and the requirement to conduct job search activity online

The requirement for claimants to do much of their job searching online combined with homeless peoples' limited access to the internet emerged as a significant issue. This was a barrier to compliance in virtually all interviews. All respondents expected to seek jobs were required to do so online, and specifically through Universal Jobmatch. Yet no interview respondent had easy,

ready access to the internet, including those who were housed. Only one respondent had his own computer, but even he could rarely afford to top up his 'Pay as you Go' internet and many did not have functioning smartphones.

Most relied on their local library but this offered limited access of an hour or so per day. Some used computers in their hostel or a local day centre but, again, reported that usage is time-limited and competition fierce. Respondents reported queuing for access to computers. Only a small minority mentioned using Jobcentre Plus computers to undertake job search.

Internet and computer *proficiency* was also a significant issue, compounding problems of access. Quite a few respondents could only do online job search/applications with help, and help was rarely available for the requisite number of hours per week that respondents were expected to job search online.

I've never used a computer in my life, they're talking to me about online this and that, it's just another language to me. (Pete)

I can't go on computers 35 hours a week, you've only got an hour a day in the library and an hour in here [day centre]...and

once I've been in the library in town I can't go in another library, I've tried, it doesn't work, once you've been in a library once for an hour you can't go back in it...they [Work Coach] see it as 'go to the library' but I can only get an hour in the library, or 'go to friends and family'...I've got friends but I'm not going to go round and go 'I'm just going to use the internet'. (Andy)

Where I am [staying] now I've got no computer, I have to go to the library in the city centre, sometimes that's hard to get on the computer and here at [day centre] it's only once a week for three hours. (Rick)

I have to do [Universal] Job match every day of the week. I've got to apply for 15 jobs a week, it's impossible, I can't even work a computer...I've got a computer at my mum and dad's maybe once or twice a week and I feel comfortable doing it there coz I get help with what I'm doing but that wasn't good enough for them. (Stuart)

Personal circumstances, vulnerabilities and support needs

Survey respondents were asked a range of questions about their health and personal experiences. Their responses indicate significant support needs amongst those subject to conditionality. Table 4.2 shows

Table 4.1. Relationship between vulnerability and difficulty complying with conditionality

	Found it difficult to meet conditions?	
	Yes	No
Been in local authority care/fostered	26	18
Have physical health problems and/or a disability	42	32
Have mental health problems	53	31
Health limits the amount or type of work I can do	63	44
Experienced violence/abuse from a parent	28	16
Experienced violence/abuse from a partner	28	21
Have alcohol/drug dependency issues	61	39
Have educational/vocational qualifications	60	69
Last regular job 5 or more years ago, or never had a regular job	49	35
Base	295	173

that around one quarter had been in care and similar proportions had experienced abuse from partners and parents, and had literacy problems. More than half reported drug and alcohol problems and, as already discussed in section 2.2, physical and mental health problems were prevalent. In general, all of these factors were a more significant issue amongst ESA WRAG claimants than JSA claimants.

Combined with high ESA claimant rates, levels of labour market detachment and work-limiting health problems (see Chapter 2), **significant levels of multiple exclusion are indicated** - amongst the full sample of homelessness service users but also specifically amongst those subject to conditionality.

Looking at these data from another angle shows that a large proportion of respondents with significant barriers to work, such as literacy difficulties and health problems, were subject to the stringent, high level of conditionality imposed for JSA, which includes the need to demonstrate significant levels of job search activity and job applications. For example:

- 54 per cent of those with difficulties with reading and writing were claiming JSA
- 49 per cent of those with a drug or alcohol dependency were claiming JSA
- 48 per cent of those who had been in local authority care were claiming JSA
- 39 per cent of those with a mental health issues were claiming JSA
- 37 per cent of those with physical health issues were claiming JSA.

In addition, amongst those sleeping rough at the time of the survey (representing 16 per cent of all those subject to conditionality) 70 per cent were claiming JSA and therefore

subject to high levels of conditionality.

Although these characteristics and life experiences do not render individuals incapable of work-related activity nor certain to struggle in their efforts to seek work, they do indicate a level of multiple disadvantage and support needs over and above that of other benefit claimants; support needs that may make it much more difficult to navigate the conditionality system and meet the obligations set down for them.

Drug and alcohol issues, and medication for mental and physical health problems, for example, affected some respondents' capacity to remember the dates and times of appointments. Stan, who was sanctioned for failing to attend an appointment, was sleeping rough at the time and drinking heavily and explained that he '*got my dates mixed up*'. And Ross explained that '*I have trouble with me memory coz of me meds*'. Respondents with poor literacy and numeracy, dyslexia and borderline learning difficulties, meanwhile, reported difficulties navigating the benefits system. Making fresh claims, appeals, and understanding and meeting job search requirements required a level of literacy and comprehension that was sometimes beyond them.

I got the dates mixed up...I were drinking quite a lot as well at the time, I've only recently got off it really. (Stan)

They were asking me to get on computers but I have trouble reading and writing and things like that so I didn't bother going back. (Pete)

I can't read and write properly and I got no help whatsoever so I had to struggle to do the form, I just about did it, asking somebody beside me to help me read and stuff like that. (Jonathan)

It took me three attempts to get down to appointment, that's why it [sanction]

lasted for so long, about a year and a half, cos usually you're meant to have that appointment after six months and it went on for ages, I kept missing them cos I was getting worked up, panicky, anxiety mainly. (Kyle)

Yeah I was claiming Jobseeker's Allowance before my illness but when I got ill I didn't think it would be hard... I said 'look this is what [medication] I'm on, I won't be able to make certain appointments cos I ain't going to be able to get out of my bed to attend these appointments'. Basically I was sanctioned for a month at first and then sanctioned for three months and then sanctioned for six months. (Lee)

Clashing appointments, dealing with other issues

The majority of survey and in-depth interview respondents were homeless, a significant proportion were sleeping rough, and many were dealing with other issues in their life such as poor mental and physical health, drug and alcohol dependency, destructive personal relationships, escaping and recovering from violent relationships, and family issues such as estrangement from children and parents. As we saw above, many of these were claiming JSA and so subject to full conditionality.

Yeah cos at the time I had quite a lot of health appointments I needed to get to

and I had to fit them around the jobcentre and it's impossible to do but they don't understand that. (Jonathan)

I come here [voluntary sector service] and I get someone to help me to look [for jobs], I think I've got an email but I don't know cos I don't keep things, my things are all over the place, my head's all over the place, I've got children in jail, my son's doing life, one doing nine years, kids' mothers who want to change the kids' names... I'm trying to hold it together. (Fred)

I wasn't looking for work, I wasn't in a state to work, I was trying to get into detox. (Brian)

Managing the psychological, practical and emotional effects and implications of these personal issues and circumstances was described by respondents as a 'full time job'. Seeking and applying for housing, attending meetings with key workers in hostels, with drug and alcohol support workers and treatment programmes, and keeping hospital and doctors' appointments was time consuming but essential for many.

Yet meeting conditionality requirements (for those on JSA) was also a full time job. It is little surprise, then, that respondents struggled to find the time to seek work for 35 hours a week or apply for 15 jobs, to keep their schedule clear for appointments, and to

Table 4.2. Personal experiences and vulnerabilities by claimant group

	JSA %	ESA WRAG %	All subject to conditionality %
Has a drug or alcohol dependency	41	70	52
Has mental health issues	28	72	45
Has a physical health problem or disability	24	66	40
Has experienced violence or abuse from a partner	20	37	26
Has difficulty reading or writing	22	30	25
Has been in LA care	19	33	24
Has experienced violence or abuse from a parent	19	32	24
Base	338	213	548

Note: these categories are not mutually exclusive

remain focused enough to apply themselves fully to the tasks they were set. The majority of survey respondents reporting difficulties meeting requirements (72 per cent) stated that clashing appointments was a problem for them.

The problem was compounded by the requirement imposed on some to seek work seven days a week, leaving respondents no spare time in which to schedule health, housing, and other personal appointments, resolve family problems, see their children, or take time out to relieve mental health issues. This was not mentioned explicitly by many of the in-depth respondents but was reported by three, one of whom said he was asked to demonstrate the jobs he had sought on New Year's Day.

Insecure postal addresses, written communication, missing post

We saw in Chapter 3 that a common reason for respondents to be sanctioned was failing to attend appointments of which they never received notification. It is not possible to verify that these letters were sent to the correct address but, assuming they were, they did not find their way to the respondent. Of those survey respondents who reported difficulties meeting conditionality requirements 64 per cent said letters do not always reach them or their post goes missing and 37 per cent said they had nowhere safe to keep their post.

This is not surprising. Respondents moved frequently, as homeless people often have to, those in hostel or night shelter accommodation sometimes lived in large buildings sharing with many other residents, and they used friends, family, and day centres as correspondence addresses. Their post was, therefore, often mediated through others, held insecurely, or not accessible on a daily basis. A couple of respondents described instances where they had informed Jobcentre Plus of a change of address, just after a letter had been sent to their previous address. Both pointed out that they had been

at Jobcentre Plus in person around the same time and failed to understand why no one told them verbally about their appointment.

Priya was one of these respondents. She had become homeless escaping domestic violence and fled to another city. Knowing no one, she provided Jobcentre Plus with a relative's address in a different city for correspondence. She quickly moved into temporary accommodation and informed Jobcentre Plus of this in person but in the meantime they had sent a letter to her correspondence address asking her to attend an appointment. She did not pick up the letter, having assumed that any correspondence would reach her at her new address, and was sanctioned.

I live in a block of flats so it doesn't mean I'm going to get that letter. You can send the letter out so you've got proof of it but there's no proof that I've got it. So if I don't get the letter they're automatically sanctioning me. (Douglas)

I didn't get letter cos they sent it to old address, I even changed it that week on the Monday, they didn't say 'you've got another appointment' they just left me guessing, they had my new address so they could have easily text me or they had my phone number and all my details. (Maggie)

DWP communication, unclear processes, complexities of the system

Many of the survey respondents who were having problems meeting conditionality requirements gave a range of issues to do with poor communication as a main reason for finding conditionality difficult to comply with:

- 64 per cent had sometimes been given the wrong information
- 48 per cent had had appointments cancelled at short notice

- 48 per cent found the letters received were difficult to understand
- 47 per cent said it was not always clear what they were meant to do.

There were also numerous examples in the in-depth interviews of apparently poor communication from DWP, possible misinformation (although not corroborated), systems that respondents found impossible to navigate, and rules and processes that sometimes appeared perverse. Helena expressed this in the following terms:

Yeah it [JSA] had been stopped...now they say from June I get nothing cos I have too big an income or something like that and I don't understand how they get to the point that I have enough income, I have no idea what's happening. It's too much for me to deal with it...It's scary actually, the conditions are not explained when you sign on first, you don't know how you will be affected, you don't have the number of the advisor, sometimes you're not even given a telephone number or an email and you don't know how to just inform people, or you call and they're not there and you

don't know who else to call. (Helena who has no income other than JSA)

It was clear in interviews that respondents were not always sure why or how their benefit claim had progressed in the way it had, and it was not always easy to piece together in interviews the history of their claim or the circumstances leading to their sanction. Errors also appear to have been made at times by DWP, including lost documentation and erroneously-applied sanctions, as Dennis' experiences demonstrate:

While I was on JSA I had to attend a two year back to work programme, I was attending, I kept all the appointments...I was doing job searches and everything and one day I got a letter saying 'you've been sanctioned cos you're not doing enough looking for work' so I seen my advisor and she got in touch with the jobcentre and said 'what's going on?'. They said 'somebody in Wimbledon is not happy with his job search' which I thought was a bit funny cos being in Leamington Spa what would it have to do with Wimbledon? But apparently that's where all the paperwork goes to. So I

Box 4.2. Case Studies

Lewis was too ill to attend an appointment at Jobcentre Plus so he phoned to inform them and his Work Coach asked him to attend the following day instead. Lewis thought it unlikely that he would recover that quickly but his Work Coach had no other dates available so insisted he attend. As expected, Lewis was too ill to attend. Once well again, a few days later (and the day he was interviewed), he called his Work Coach to arrange a time the following day (also his signing on day and the day before the Easter weekend) to deliver his sick note but neither his Work Coach nor any other advisor had an available appointment. Lewis was also told, however, that he could not sign on the following day as usual because he had been recorded as a 'failure to attend' and so was not allowed to sign on until he had been seen about this. Yet no-one was available to see him until after the Easter weekend. Lewis was extremely concerned that he would be sanctioned

for failing to attend his appointment and/or failing to sign on. He certainly knew he would receive no benefit until he was allowed to sign on.

Benjamin is in the process of applying to have his discretionary leave to remain (initially granted for three years) renewed. While his application is being considered, which is taking some months, the Home Office has the documentation employers require before they can issue a contract of employment. Were Benjamin to secure a job, his new employer would not be able to proceed with his appointment. Benjamin was, in fact, recently offered a job but the offer was withdrawn when he could not produce his papers. Jobcentre Plus are fully aware of the situation but nevertheless require him to do extensive job search activity. We saw earlier in this chapter that Benjamin was sanctioned for failing to prove he had done sufficient job searching for work he would not be able to take up, were he offered it.

made an appointment to see somebody at the jobcentre and they said 'you've been sanctioned for six weeks cos you're not doing a significant job search'. I took with me my folder and I said 'which month does this apply to?' that was July, and I took out every job I'd applied for in July and there was 350 and they took a copy of it and said 'you'll hear the decision'. A decision was made four weeks later that I was doing more than enough and my claim was reinstated. Next time I went to sign on...yet again I was sanctioned for three weeks from the same person in Wimbledon, not doing enough job searching. (Dennis)

At least two respondents failed to meet their requirements (attending an appointment or course) because location details were erroneously provided or not at all. In a small number of examples the system appeared completely illogical - these are presented as case studies in Box 4.2.

4.3 Key points

- 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.' Yet the requirements detailed in respondents' Claimant Commitment documents were frequently seemingly impossible to meet, inconsiderate of their constrained circumstances, and sometimes failed to take account of respondents' particular skills and employment experience.
- Respondents described Work Coaches who seemed uninterested in gathering relevant information about their circumstances and capabilities. Thus rough sleepers with additional vulnerabilities (mental health issues, dependencies) and no ready access to the internet were being required to apply for 10-15 jobs per week and spend several hours every day searching for jobs online. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the majority of respondents (63 per cent) found the conditionality requirements placed upon them difficult to meet.
- 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.
- The evidence suggests that it is systemic and personal barriers to meeting conditionality requirements that explains the high sanction rate amongst homelessness service users rather than unwillingness to comply.

5. Supporting homeless people into work: what works?

The research was interested in shedding light on 'what works' for homelessness service users in relation to helping them achieve their aspiration to work or, in the case of those unable to work, to enhance skills and confidence to move them closer to the labour market, and address those issues hindering their capacity to work.

There is considerable in-system support for JSA and ESA WRAG claimants. All are assigned a Work Coach with whom they meet regularly and whose role it is to support claimants, and help them find work or take steps to move closer to work. Universal Jobmatch - a website set up by the Government where job vacancies are advertised - provides a resource for jobseekers and employers, helping match jobs to the most suitable jobseekers. People claiming JSA for longer than three months and those in the ESA WRAG can also take advantage of the services and schemes available through the Work Programme - a 'welfare-to-work' programme launched in 2011 and delivered by a range of private, public and voluntary sector organisations under contract to the Government. The Work Programme offers support to find work, courses, training and work experience.

The current five year contracts for this programme of employment support are coming to an end and the Work Programme will be re-commissioned in England and Wales, with new contracts beginning in 2017. Employment Support in Scotland will be devolved at that time. It is not yet clear what a devolved programme of employment support, and the use of conditionality within this, will look like but consultation is underway, overseen by an advisory group chaired by Professor Alan McGregor.

Homelessness service users participating in this research were asked in some detail about their experiences of this in-system

support. Respondents also talked about the support and assistance they received beyond that provided through the benefit system. Homelessness service users come into contact with a wide range of professionals, some of whom play a role in supporting people to move closer to the labour market. Day centres and other voluntary sector homelessness services often run courses and training, for example, and some offer opportunities for volunteering. Key workers in hostels and support workers may also help their clients with work-related activities as part of their wider remit to support clients into a more secure, stable life and promote their well-being.

In this chapter we draw on survey and in-depth interview respondents' experiences of all forms of support to draw conclusions about those that appeared to make a positive difference to their experiences and outcomes.

5.1 In-system support

The level of interaction with Jobcentre Plus staff varies widely depending on the level of conditionality expected for the benefit group. So, asking a standard set of questions about the in-system support respondents received is complex. Three out of five survey respondents who said they had some level of difficulty, even if only a small amount, in meeting their conditionality requirements were subject to the higher level of conditionality imposed via JSA. Of these, 66 per cent agreed that their advisor/ Work Coach was helpful/sometimes helpful and 55 per cent agreed that sometimes the job search target they had been set was achievable. Of this same group (JSA claimants finding it difficult to meet conditionality requirements) 41 per cent said Jobcentre Plus had helped/sometimes helped them look for work, 39 per cent found the Work Programme helpful/sometimes helpful and 33 per cent agreed the courses they had been sent on had been useful/sometimes

useful, but only nine per cent said the help they had received had helped/sometimes helped them find work.

ESA WRAG claimants have less interaction with Jobcentre Plus as they are not required to sign on or attend as many work-focused interviews. They are also subject to a lower level of conditionality as they are not expected to look for work. Of the ESA WRAG claimants that found conditionality difficult 62 per cent agreed that their advisor/Work Coach was helpful/sometimes helpful, 40 per cent said Jobcentre Plus had helped/sometimes helped them look for work, only 20 per cent found the Work Programme helpful/sometimes helpful and 18 per cent agreed the courses they had been sent on had been useful/sometimes useful, but only eight per cent said the help they had received had helped/sometimes helped them find work. Claimants in the ESA WRAG are not expected to find work so it is interesting that, amongst our survey respondents, JSA claimants were only slightly more likely than ESA WRAG claimants to report that the help they received helped them to find work (nine per cent, see above).

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 had 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, and being supported to build CVs and improve interview skills, while others reported being treated with disdain and offered nothing they recognised as help and assistance to find work. The quotes in Box 5.1. show the wide variation in experiences.

Respondents who had been assigned more than one Work Coach during their time claiming benefits often stressed the point that the value and effectiveness of support was

highly variable, explicitly noting the difference between one office or advisor and another in relation to issues such as the level of conditionality imposed, consideration given to respondents' circumstances, the help provided seeking work, discretion employed when targets were not quite achieved and the value of courses, training and work experience they were referred to. This raises questions about consistency of service and implementation of regulations. As Jonathan and Maggie's comments show:

Cos it's only a small office, you get to know the advisor a lot better, at [X place] they were very good, he got me on courses and that, I had him all the time, but when I moved to [Y place] they're different people, you don't get that relationship cos it's a bigger office. (Maggie)

I've had some nice advisors, but some of them won't do anything. (Jonathan)

Some advice and support was found to be counter-productive, particularly amongst respondents already engaged in training but who were prohibited from continuing, required to attend alternative (less valuable) courses/Work Programme, or who no longer had time to devote to independent activities because of job search conditions.

Respondents rarely, if ever, found the activities provided through the benefit system more useful, effective, or appropriate than those they were independently engaged with. If their existing work-related commitments (training courses and such like) were being replaced by better, more effective, more appropriate training and activities then the shift would be positive but this was not often the case. Some respondents reported being sent on training courses that were inappropriate, that failed to increase an individual's chance of getting work, and got in the way of meaningful engagement with the labour market. Participants were of the view that their time would have been better

spent doing more appropriate training or simply looking for work. Amrit, for example, was required to attend a two month basic course in forklift truck driving that he had already attended six months previously and not found useful the first time. He asked to be enrolled on the higher level course but his request was denied. Brian recounts his experience of being sent on a basic training course despite having a 20 year work history in the following words:

I've worked all my life, I explained this to them and it was workshops on how to do a CV, how to conduct yourself in the interview, it was like how to boil an egg. I've worked since I was 17, I don't need to know how to conduct an interview, I don't need to know how to write my name and address, I explained all this, they passed everyone in, like I'm next to people in the groups that couldn't speak English, people that have never worked in their life... (Brian)

Respondents' views of Universal Jobmatch were relatively consistent. All respondents were in receipt of JSA or ESA WRAG so we would not expect to find recent examples of positive outcomes (i.e. securing a job) from using the website. However, Universal Jobmatch appeared to be yielding no opportunities (interviews, contact with potential future employers) for those participating in this study. Three key concerns emerged in relation to Universal Jobmatch:

- Hardly ever receiving a courtesy response acknowledging applications or informing respondents they had been unsuccessful securing an interview
- Extremely low success rates with respondents reporting making hundreds of applications without a single interview (or indeed a response of any kind)

Never get nothing, like over the last year I've probably applied for a couple of hundred jobs and not even had a no thank you,

nothing... and some of the jobs you apply for, a month later they're still on. (Gerry)

- Jobs remaining on Universal Jobmatch for months, as Gerry's comment above indicates, arousing suspicion that they are not genuine vacancies. This also reduced the number of jobs available each week for respondents to apply for, a particular problem for those with high targets.

This had a demotivating effect on respondents, some of whom were already low in confidence and had felt hopeful and optimistic about the opportunities they may be able to tap into through Universal Jobmatch and the wider support on offer.

5.2 What works for homeless people?

Several factors emerged, and were identified by respondents as making a positive difference to the experience and outcomes of work-related activity, and to respondents' willingness to engage. Certain types of activity/support were also valued particularly highly by respondents.

A trusting and supportive claimant/Work Coach relationship

It was striking that positive experiences of Jobcentre Plus or the Work Programme were usually related to the relationship individuals were able to forge with their advisors. Supportive staff at Jobcentres and the Work Programmes made a significant difference to how people experienced the benefits system. Maggie described how her Work Coach helped her:

She really helped me this woman [officer at the jobcentre], I were panicking, she calmed me down and she said 'we'll make sure you get your money' and she really persisted and were really good... (Maggie)

Key to this relationship was the extent to which respondents felt they were listened to, supported and understood. This is reflected in the positive ways in which respondents

talked about other professionals with whom they had contact. Respondents were often receiving help from a range of support workers/professionals. Key professionals, who were knowledgeable and skilled in providing individualised, practical support were very much appreciated, but support that recognised emotional needs appeared to have the most positive impact. The most highly regarded professionals invariably considered respondents' well-being, in a broader sense. This points to the importance of personal attributes, as articulated by Gerry and Helena:

...cos it's not only about a job in my situation but about my overall well-being as well. I come from a family life that's been difficult. (Helena)

Yeah you get a housing officer here, a social worker and the social worker helps you and if you've got problems with benefit or you need to go to the dentist or they'll help you phone the right places, they're really helpful here [hostel]... Yeah and if you're down and upset they'll sit and speak to you and listen to you and if they can do something about it they'll try and do something about it. (Gerry).

In contrast to Gerry's key worker who would 'sit and speak to you and listen to you', it was hard for participants to put their trust in someone who had limited time. What worked was having an advisor who would give them the time to go through and explain their requirements. Thus, the quality and time allocated to an interaction at the Work Programme, compared with Jobcentre Plus, made a difference to Dennis:

Well your jobseekers advisor has got something like four minutes to see you whereas you go to your advisor at the work programme, they're in half hour segments and if you get talking and it overruns that's all right. So there's quite a difference. (Dennis)

Just as time constraints could undermine a positive claimant/advisor relationship, so too could the manner in which advisors related to respondents. Often already at a low ebb, respondents could be very sensitive to the way they were spoken to and the apparent attitude of others toward them. It was relatively common for respondents to report feeling 'looked down on' (Amrit) with advisors described as 'snotty' (Andy and Maggie). There was a sense that Jobcentre Plus staff failed to understand, or were not interested in their circumstances or the problems they were facing and so treated them with little understanding or compassion. This was sometimes contrasted with the experience of using voluntary sector agencies where they felt understood and valued. Helena makes this point:

X is a charity supporting homeless people, they have qualification courses as well as leisure courses, just to have people off the streets during the daytime, make them feel they're progressing and not I'm just on the street... they treat somebody like you're valuable. (Helena)

Individualised, tailored support

When people were matched with a Work Coach who understood their particular needs they were more likely to be helped appropriately to seek suitable work. It was important that people saw the same advisor over time as this enabled the advisor to get to know them, their job history and skills, and keep updated about fluctuations in respondents' circumstances (changing housing and health for example). It also helped to match to appropriate training, as was the case with Gerry:

Well I had to go on a three week course cos when they said 'are you computer literate, do you think you can do it, work out how to attach a CV?' I said no so I went on a three week course and that did help cos now I know how to do it but before I had no chance, I didn't know. (Gerry)

This short course increased Gerry's confidence in using a computer and enabled him to access Universal Jobmatch with greater ease. Interestingly, Gerry also pointed to the value of recognising that not everyone was starting on a 'level playing field' and that those who struggled with IT, for example (including older people and those with literacy needs), should be given greater support, as he had experienced on his course:

There were a few older people that were on my course, they were 60 year old and they haven't got a clue, and even they were teaching them... What they did say, if we didn't pass the course in three weeks they would extend it till they thought they were... (Gerry)

In essence, what worked was having an advisor who was skilful in helping them to engage with employment and training but who also treated respondents as individuals, and took that approach to matching them to appropriate training and the jobs market. The individualised approach also worked well for Anisa who had mental health issues and cared for her daughter at weekends:

I don't want to be on benefits. But I don't want to get a full time job where it cuts

off all my benefits and I'm going to have to pay everything out of my own pocket, I'll just be working towards paying rent and I won't even have anything for other expenses. So me and my advisor are trying to find a job where it's not going to take a toll on me, something that I can get working tax credits and there's a lot of things I can get when I'm working but I just need that right amount, type of job, right amount of hours, there's a lot that they look at. My job search is quite a big range but it's quite limited as well because I don't want a full time job, and also I get my daughter every weekend, Saturday and Sunday so I can't work at the weekend. So it's not just I can't get a job, it's cos of my restrictions. (Anisa)

It was common for respondents to bemoan the apparent 'one size fits all' approach of some Work Coaches who, some respondents felt, were not considerate to their skills and employment preferences and who, as a result, referred clients to courses that did little to improve employability (see Chapters 4 and 7.6. for further discussion). When asked how the current system could be improved, a more tailored system of support, and appreciation of claimants' skills were commonly mentioned. For example:

Box 5.1. Variable experiences of in-system support

It was interview skills and mock interviews, I went there for my job search, I went up there more than I had to cos I quite liked it and I had people there all the time, different workers, there was always somebody to help you out. (Sonia)

Yeah I went on a two week course which were no help whatsoever, all I did were make a CV that were all in the whole two weeks... and the work groups they put you on, the one I went on recently...there were a different person [instructor] every day and they had no idea what they were doing...they had us doing job search and CVs every day for two weeks, there were no advice on techniques for interviews or anything like it said it should have been...I were actually looking forward to getting some techniques but I didn't get them. (Jonathan)

I seen this one [Work Coach] one day and he was virtually reading the jobcentre rule book, if you don't do this you'll be sanctioned, if you don't do that you'll be sanctioned, and I said 'yes but I am doing it so why are you talking about sanctioning?' Others, they're more easy. (Dennis)

Well sometimes I've got a personal advisor and he'd give you help and tips and things and they're quite helpful, that was the aim of the work programme wasn't it, to give you extra assistance. (Graham)

They'll help me with anything I need...yeah they are helping me get a job, well they're not really helping, they just show me the paths and give me ideas of what to do and then I'll go off and do it. (Anisa)

Finding jobs themselves for people and having it more 'have you got the skills for this' and picking people out of a pool and saying 'we're recommending you for this job'...having a database of people and matching the skills with the jobs that come up, having employers speak to the jobcentre and say 'we need five staff have you got anyone suitable?' and then putting people forward...whereas if you leave it it's more a job that's not suited to people...the system definitely doesn't work anyway. (Martin)

Flexibility, discretion and a non-directive approach

It was important to respondents that there was enough flexibility in the system to be allowed to have choices and preferences. When respondents felt like an individual needing assistance rather than 'just a number' they were more likely to engage positively with the system of support offered through the benefit system. Anisa had a very positive experience of one of her Work Coaches. Crucially, she gave Anisa the impression she had some control over her searches:

She's just really understanding and she asks me all the time 'are you sure you want this?' and also she'll be 'think about it and come back to me with the answer' she doesn't put me on the spot, that's what I really like. Cos I feel like sometimes they tell you 'do you want to do this?' and you feel you have to say yeah, I feel like if I say no it might be the wrong answer and then they stop my claim or something. (Anisa)

Brian describes his ideal scenario (for a Work Programme session) in similar terms:

An actual careers advisor sitting down and discussing options, but helping you, not telling you, giving you options, ideas, not dictating but just telling you here's what's available, colleges, grants, courses, do you want to, not you have to, offering help and not telling you what you have to do. (Brian)

Indeed a key reason for respondents' exclusively positive views of the work-related activity (courses, volunteering, support) provided to them by the voluntary sector was that they had choice and control over their activities, so as to guarantee relevance and value in terms of improving employability.

Volunteer training

Two respondents reported having been on a work placement via the Work Programme and both emphasised how valuable this had been and how much they had enjoyed being gainfully employed during this period. One other respondent was due to start his placement in a hotel and felt similarly positive about the prospect:

It was when I was actually on the placement, I really thought that was good, not the sitting in the classroom stuff but actually hands on work, I didn't care I was getting £30 extra on my job seekers, I was working, I wanted to do it... It was brilliant, I really enjoyed it, but you only do one training thing a year and it only lasts for four weeks, I wished it had lasted longer. (Kyle)

I'm happy to do it cos it's experience and I can put it on my CV but there might not even be a job at the end of it ...but I'm just going to try my hardest and show I'm willing and capable and hope there's a job for me. (Martin)

Respondents talked in similar terms about their experience of volunteering through voluntary sector organisations.

I volunteered here for a while, I enjoyed that... I enjoyed helping out here for a while, I loved it... (Brian)

It was important to respondents, however, that they gained valuable skills and experience through volunteering/placements and had some prospect of securing paid employment as a result. Gerry, who had no direct experience of volunteering, was

sceptical that this was the case, and was deterred from such activity as a result:

Once you've been on long term for a year you have to go on the Work Programme which involves you being sent to a warehouse for eight weeks where you've got to work for nothing to gain your skills what I've already got, and they're saying at the end of this they might set you on but they won't cos they know after they'll get somebody else for eight weeks. (Gerry)

IT training and dedicated IT tutors

Developing basic IT skills, including sending emails, attaching CVs and doing a universal job search (all minimum requirements) emerged as a key factor in respondents' ability to reach their individual job search targets. It was also a significant barrier to engagement for some, as we saw in Chapter 4. Respondents who were not IT or internet proficient greatly valued the computer skills courses and support offered to them by Jobcentre Plus and by the day centres and charities whose services they used. Several thought more could be done to increase or improve this offer, however, with some identifying it as a crucial gap in the support package available. The value of having dedicated IT tutors was suggested by Adam:

There should be more IT, not training, tutors, more IT tutors for people that... cos when you go and sign on and see a worker they're just sitting at a desk typing but they should have separate workers that should be able to sit down and if you're not sure on a computer they should be engaging instead of having to wander round the jobcentre going to look for somebody to help cos that's frustrating. (Adam)

The difference such a course made to Dennis and the boost to his self-esteem from having accomplished something in the first day - comes through clearly in his comment below:

I done a computer course, I could use a

computer, log in, send emails...it was four weeks, cos they got me a bus pass so I could go in, I went in, the first day I was there I went through this one programme and he said 'you're ready for the test' it was on computer security, I got 98 per cent. (Dennis)

5.3. Key points

- Respondents' experiences of the in-system 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. Certainly some described helpful Work Coaches and useful courses, but others felt they were treated with disdain and sent on training that did nothing to improve their employability.
- 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 courtesy 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 already had relatively low self-esteem.
- What made a difference to respondents' experiences of and outcomes in relation to work-related activity (in and outwith the system) was: a trusting and supportive Work Coach/key worker relationship; individualised, tailored support; a non-directive approach; volunteer training so long as it did not appear exploitative; and IT support.
- Although respondents had been provided with valuable support through the benefit system, none found this more useful or effective than when it was provided through voluntary sector agencies and other professionals with whom they were in contact.

6. Coping with sanctions

With no income for much of the duration of their sanction, survey and interview respondents described employing a range of strategies to meet their basic needs - to feed themselves; to stay warm while keeping energy costs to a minimum; and to travel to Jobcentre Plus, the library, or the Work Programme to continue meeting their Claimant Commitment. Table 6.1. shows the range of ways in which survey respondents managed, from ‘doing without’, to borrowing, to stealing, and with a heavy reliance on the voluntary and charitable sector. It is notable that more respondents had gone hungry, visited food banks and other charities, and had stolen essential items as had received a hardship payment.

The survey results were consistent with the ways in which in-depth interview respondents coped without funds while sanctioned. Respondents described borrowing from friends, family and loan sharks (for cash and food) and ‘going without’; housed respondents stopped using heating or hot water, and everyone ate badly or intermittently. The only coping strategies which emerged in addition to those specified by survey respondents were: selling personal

items such as furniture and white goods; and accruing debt on amenities and facilities for which respondents were billed (gas, electricity, water, phone). These options were typically available only to those who were housed.

This chapter considers some of these strategies for coping in more detail: we use the term ‘getting by’ or ‘coping’ rather loosely because, as we will see, it is questionable whether eating one meal a day, turning the heating off in winter, or seeing prison as a preferable option constitutes ‘getting by’ in any reasonable sense.

6.1 Hardship payments

Hardship payments, usually paid at 60 per cent of claimants’ JSA/ESA, are available for people who cannot meet their basic needs as a result of a sanction. For claimants on Universal Credit, hardship payments are a loan and are time-limited (although subsequent applications can be made) while for those on JSA or ESA they are paid as a grant and continue for the duration of a sanction. Claimants are expected to have done all they can to secure income from other sources before they apply.

Table 6.1. Have you done any of the following as a result of having benefit stopped due to being sanctioned? (sanctioned survey respondents reporting ‘yes’)

	%
Gone hungry or skipped meals	77
Gone without heating	64
Borrowed from friends or family	64
Got food/essentials from a charity other than a food bank	63
Received a food parcel from a food bank	61
Stole food, toiletries or other essentials	38
Received a hardship payment	36
Begged	28
Took out a loan from a loan shark or pay day lender	19

Base: 212



Over one-third (36 per cent) of sanctioned survey respondents had received a hardship payment, leaving a significant proportion (64 per cent) who had not. The picture was very similar amongst survey respondents and those who did access the hardship fund usually did so intermittently, only having income from this source for a proportion of the time they were sanctioned.

Following recommendations made by Matthew Oakley in his independent review of JSA Benefit Sanctions in 2014, the Government committed to improve information and communication about hardship payments.²⁷ The evidence from this study raises questions about the effectiveness of measures to better inform sanctioned claimants about hardship payments. Many sanctioned respondents interviewed in-depth did not recall being informed about hardship payments and some of those who did access them found out about it from friends and acquaintances. David, for example, explained that *'I looked on Facebook and one of my family or friends said "apply for it".'* When asked whether Jobcentre Plus staff had informed him about hardship payments, Phillip, similarly, reported that *'no they didn't, a homeless geezer told me, he said "apply for hardship, that's the only thing you can do" and I'm "what's hardship?".'*

Others knew about the fund but were deterred from applying by the waiting period, or by the requirement to repay the loan²⁸ which, they felt, would only result in subsequent hardship. For example:

I haven't even put it [hardship claim] through, I don't see the point, cos it's going to take all that time for my claim to go through. (Phillip)

You can claim for hardship in a couple of weeks' which were pretty pointless, I'm in hardship now, I've got to wait another two weeks before I can even claim hardship and after that I've got to wait another couple of weeks for the hardship to get accepted. (Paul)

I were told you can claim hardship fund but when your claim is processed they take that back what you've already had, so what's point. (Gerry)

6.2 'Going without'

More than three quarters of survey respondents (77 per cent) went hungry or skipped meals during the period they were sanctioned and this was common amongst interview respondents also, who described rationing meals in order to get through the week:

You have to do a day eating and then [a day] not. (Jonathan)

You have to just limit yourself to [eating]... when you feel like you're getting depressed. (Helena)

Being forced to miss meals, then, was common, with the majority of interview respondents limiting themselves to one meal a day at most, or as Joe put it, *'just living on my breakfast'*. Others went *'a couple of days'* (Priya) without eating or *'lived off biscuits'* (Paul). Ja described his complicated meal planning:

I'd come here [day centre] on Monday for food, they might have a couple of loaves of bread what you'd be able to take so I would be able to use that for the next couple of days. Or it would be Monday

²⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/332137/jsa-sanctions-independent-review-government-response.pdf

²⁸ It is not clear how well informed respondents were with regard to whether a hardship payment would be repayable in their case. Most were claiming JSA or ESA and so would not have to repay.

have nothing to eat, Tuesday have nothing to eat, come here Wednesday and get something to eat here Wednesday and then Thursday you used to be able to get a breakfast at another church at the bottom and Friday come back here, Saturday nowhere to go on a Saturday, but there is now, John has opened up a place called X so you can go there now on a Saturday for breakfast, but nothing through the day so you've just got breakfast, but they do give you as much cereal as you want, scrambled egg on toast or summat like that, that runs till 12 o'clock but then you've got to go 12 o'clock till Sunday, there's a place on Sunday you can go but they don't open till 6 o'clock in night. (Ja)

Ja was relying on day centres for his meals and, as we will see in the next section, it was common for respondents to rely on food banks and other voluntary sector organisations in order to eat. These services were a lifeline to respondents and a crucial emergency measure but they were no substitute for steady income which allows for regular meal patterns. As Ja's experience shows, respondents who turned to food banks, day centres, and soup runs had restricted and time-limited access to food during the hours of operation of those services and often went hungry in between. Food parcels lasted a fortnight at a stretch and many drop-in centres only served breakfast. Others were a bus journey away or charged a fee for meals, and although this was relatively small by normative standards, for those with no income at all it proved a struggle to raise. As one respondent explained, *'if I can get 60p off a friend, I can get a bowl of soup [in here]'*.

Not everyone was comfortable using food banks and charities. For some, the prospect of having to access a food bank, or to ask for help with something as basic as food, filled them with such a sense of shame that it was

easier to 'go without'. Anisa, for example, explained that 'I would be too embarrassed to go and ask anyone or to ask here' while others, like Benjamin, felt that it was not 'in their nature' to ask for things: 'I'm not that way inclined so I just stay in my room and read'. In a similar vein, some respondents played down skipping meals, like Anisa who, when asked whether there was anything she forewent, responded casually 'just food sometimes'.

There was evidence of respondents having to 'adjust' physically and mentally to hunger, and devising strategies to ignore it. They spoke of having to 'go to my room and try and sleep it off' (Anisa), 'stay in; watch telly' (Benjamin), or to 'not think about food in the day' at all (Phillip). Paul talked through his strategy of managing one meal a day by cutting short the time he spent awake:

I try and stay in bed, sleep through most of the day and then get up, have my breakfast and then I've only got a little bit of time until I can go back to sleep again [...] eating so early builds up your metabolism so you're going to be hungry later on. If you don't eat nothing in the morning chances are you could probably go all day without something to eat, that's fine. (Paul)

Food was not the only essential that respondents reported 'going without'. Survey results confirmed that 64 per cent of sanctioned respondents also went without heating. Unable to pay bills or to avoid (further) debt to utility companies, respondents switched off heating (often in winter) or turned off energy at the mains for prolonged periods. Ja explained how he had turned off the gas at the mains and had been without central heating or hot water for months; he improvised by using a small electric heater, and an electric shower and kettle for hot water. Stuart – who was living in social rented accommodation with his

brother when they were both sanctioned at the same time – described how they rationed money for electricity during the winter, limited themselves to two showers a week, and ‘just sat in the living room with covers around... it used to get really cold’.

6.3 Food banks and charities

It is perhaps no surprise that so many sanctioned respondents in this study turned to food banks and other voluntary sector services for food and other essentials. Recent evidence suggests a rapid surge in the use of food banks nationally with 913,100 people being fed by Trussell Trust food banks in 2013/14, an increase of 163 per cent from the 2012/13 total of 347,000.²⁹ According to data collected by The Trussell Trust for 2013/14, problems with benefits emerged as a primary reason for food bank use. In 2013/14, 31 per cent of all UK referrals were attributed to ‘benefit delays’ and a further 17 per cent to ‘benefit changes’.³⁰ Our survey found that **61 per cent of those sanctioned had received a food parcel from a food bank, and 63 per cent had received food assistance and other essentials from another charity as a direct result of their sanction.** Food banks and other services were used primarily for food but additionally for toiletries, cleaning products, and even pet food.

It is worth noting that the voluntary sector was additionally relied upon heavily for advice and assistance with sanction-related issues such as help and advice with appeals and sanction-related Housing Benefit or rent arrears problems, or signposting and referrals to food banks and charities.

Most of those interviewed had never used a food bank before being sanctioned and there were increases in the use of other services, as the following quotes illustrate:

I wasn't using this [day centre] until I got sanctioned. (Alistair)

I used to go down there, the soup run, I've been using them for a year or so but I was getting paid [benefits] then. I used to go there once or twice a week in case I need it, but now it's every day. (Amrit)

I weren't coming in every day, I was coming in every other day but then four weeks [while sanctioned] I had to come in every day. (David)

We found two cases where Jobcentre Plus workers referred sanctioned respondents to a food bank but in most cases, it was word of mouth among friendship networks, signposting from hostel/advice workers, or chance that respondents were made aware of food banks and other services. This is illustrated in the quotes below:

...the parish church at St. Stephen's, I was passing and I bumped into a guy I know and he said 'I'm just round here for a meal'. I said 'what do you mean, for free?' He said 'Aye, they provide you with a three-course meal'. (Adam)

I walked up the street and I seen the queue and I thought 'what's this?' Loads of people lining up, so I lined up with them, and it was 'here you are mate, have some pasta' [...] and that's what I've been doing for the past couple of weeks, going to the soup runs and that. (Phillip)

Respondents often structured their days around the opening hours of particular services with the receipt of food and other necessities the ultimate priority of their day. Amrit, for instance, would ‘come here [the day centre] in the morning, have a shower, food and then food in town’.

²⁹ Source: <http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>; rounded to nearest 100

³⁰ Beatty, C., Eadson, W. and Foden, M. (2015) Food bank provision for families in North Nottinghamshire. Sheffield, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research.

6.4 Help from friends and relatives

Respondents called upon support from friends, family and neighbours during the time they were sanctioned. Our survey revealed that **64 per cent of those sanctioned had borrowed from a friend or family member as a result of having their benefits stopped due to being sanctioned.** Qualitative evidence from interviewing further substantiates this. But respondents did not only borrow money from friends and relatives; there were numerous examples of respondents eating meals at a relative's house, receiving food donations from flat mates, hitching lifts with neighbours, and using children's computers for job searching.

This informal support network often kicked in when living off support solely from the voluntary sector was found insufficient. However, not everybody could, or wanted to ask others for help. Although in most cases familial and related support was given unconditionally, it still came at a price for some respondents, who felt guilty about being dependent on people who were often struggling financially themselves. In some cases it ruined relationships, as we will see in Chapter 7.

Relying on friends and family to eat while sanctioned

I went to see my mum. 'Cos she's a pensioner she said "I can't help you out with money but if I'm having a meal I'm willing to share". (Gerry)

My brother's girlfriend was making me sandwiches and things like that. He used to come and take me to his house and cook. (Fred)

My mum used to cook for me and give me food and I used to bring it here. (Iman)

I just go down the road to my friend's house. Well, my friend runs a restaurant so I can go there and get a pizza or something. (Luke)

My mum would do anything for me food-wise [...] I go there sometimes for a good meal once a week. (Rick)

Family, friends and neighbours of sanctioned claimants often made sure they did not go hungry. Dennis' neighbours, for example, offered him loaves of bread and gave him a lift to Jobcentre Plus to sign on:

Where I was living was full of pensioners and they were saying "I've just bought a loaf of bread and I've found I've got two in the freezer; you can have one of the frozen ones".

One of them one day said to me "when do you sign on?" I said "tomorrow". "How are you getting there?" I said "I'll probably walk it" "No, you won't, I'm going into town to do some shopping. I'll wait for you and bring you back as well".

It was common for respondents to eat meals at family or friends' houses or spend time there keeping warm, and friends and family helped out financially where they could. Anisa borrowed from her mum 'once or twice' so she could take her daughter out when she came to visit (she wasn't allowed in the hostel). Iman visited his family frequently and his mum lent him the bus fare so he could continue to do so. Sometimes support was reciprocal, as in the case of Lee who cared for his parents in return for 'bread and board': 'my parents were keeping me. There was food in the house, so basically I was there to look after my mum, my mum was there to look after me'. In one exceptional case, it was a landlord who was supportive and understanding when Gerry could not afford to pay his rent:

He's a nice landlord, if he were a strict landlord he'd be saying "I'm not being funny but you've lived here for a month for free and you've given me no money" But he's a friend so I'm lucky that way, he understands what's happened. (Gerry)

While support from family and peers was crucial (indeed, one respondent stressed he would have turned to crime without it), such support is not always available. Many respondents had difficult or non-existent relationships with parents and other family members while others' families were struggling themselves. Helena, for example, came to the UK to study, work and to start a new life away from the family violence she knew in Germany. Having found this process to be more difficult than expected Helena signed on while continuing to look for work which she hoped would eventually fund a college course. When she was sanctioned support from family could not be relied upon; indeed Helena preferred sleeping rough on the streets to the thought of returning to her family in Germany:

I didn't want my old life back so instead of going back I decided to sleep on the streets in London and I never thought I would be able to do that instead of going back. (Helena)

Helena also made a more general point that at her age she should be independent enough to fend for herself - 'I'm 30 years old, you can't ask somebody to pay for you all the time.' This was a view shared by others, making them reluctant to seek support from family. The shame of having to be dependent later in life was raised by Rick, for example, who said 'my mum would do anything for me [...] but I'm 33, I should be able to look after myself moneywise'. Similarly, Joe hid his sanction from those closest to him and tried to manage on his own, not telling his sister (his one family member with whom he had contact) so as not to worry her.

Where respondents did rely on support from family and friends, this was not always sustainable over extended periods. It could place pressure on relationships, eroding this important source of support. We return to this issue in Chapter 7.6 when we look at the impact of sanctions on social and familial relationships.

6.5 Survival crime and begging

Of those survey respondents sanctioned in the past year, **38 per cent said they had stolen or shoplifted food, toiletries or other essentials, while 28 per cent reported begging as a direct result of having their benefits sanctioned**. These strategies for getting by were generally only considered out of desperation. When faced with starvation, survival crime and begging seemed like rational choices. Stuart explained that he had been without food for days before shoplifting:

I've had to steal before, I've done a trolley dash and got caught for it. But I was in a really bad... I had no food for days [...] So I went round the shop and filled the trolley and walked out and got a tap on the shoulder. "You're nicked!" [...] I was starving so that was it. I got charged for it. But that was cos it was really bad.

Respondents who had shoplifted were keen to emphasise that this was the first time they had done so. Phillip (aged 21), who had been evicted from his hostel because his Housing Benefit had stopped after he had been sanctioned, told a similar story about why he chose to beg on one occasion:

It was 5 o'clock in the morning. I woke up and couldn't feel nothing with the cold and that. Couldn't feel the end of my fingers and my toes and then I just sat there and asked 'have you got three quid mate?

Unfortunately the passers by Phillip approached were policemen and he was arrested.

When respondents admitted shoplifting or begging it was usually articulated as necessity but others stole because they felt they had 'nothing to lose'. In a number of cases, respondents actively tried to get caught shoplifting, seeing life in prison to be preferable to the destitution they were facing. Such acts illustrate the levels of despair some respondents reached, as articulated by Ja and Andy:

I was sat in my flat and I decided I'm going to go to Matalan and I'm going to get arrested and get locked up and sent away to jail cos I can't cope with this world no more. So I went to Matalan...got loads of bags and started filling, in front of the security guard as well, I did it...and went outside and the security guard wouldn't even arrest me, I was 'come on arrest me please' and he didn't even realise...so I went back in the shop and said 'look I've stole loads of clothes' and I started to run, cos I wanted to be arrested...the security guard grabbed me round the neck and I went 'finally' and I broke down to the police officer in the car and I went 'finally I can go to jail and get away from the world'. (Ja)

I've got nothing to lose if I go to jail, it's a roof over my head and three square meals. (Andy)

Most, however, struggled instead, not wanting to risk getting caught and spending time in prison. Others said that shoplifting had crossed their minds as an option but they had not (yet) acted on it:

It's come in my head, when you're proper hungry and you're walking past a shop and see a box of bread or something but I never acted on the thought, but it were always there. (Paul)

6.6 Key points

- When benefits are withdrawn following a sanction, claimants can - and many participating in this research did - find themselves with no income. The evidence from this study suggests that only a minority (albeit a sizable minority - 36 per cent) access hardship payments and that, in any case, these rarely cover the full duration of respondents' sanction, or series of sanctions.
- Respondents employed a range of strategies to meet their basic need while

sanctioned, with the evidence suggesting that homelessness service users are having to 'beg, borrow and steal' to meet their daily needs while others are 'going without' essentials such as food. As many respondents reported having shoplifted as a direct result of their sanction as had received a hardship payment.

- Removing an individual's means of income through sanctioning shifts 'dependence' from the welfare state to the voluntary sector and the family unit. Respondents relied on drop-ins, soup runs, faith-based organisations and the kindness of friends and family for food and support but none of these constituted a sufficient enough replacement, nor a sustainable one.

7. The impact of benefit sanctions: intended and unintended consequences

The core objective of welfare reform, of which the current conditionality and sanctions regime is a key component, is to encourage, support and incentivise more people into work. Government rationale for the use of sanctions is that they are effective in changing behaviour that will, in turn, reduce unemployment. The evidence reported in this chapter 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 and seek work. However, being sanctioned also had a series of wider impacts on respondents' lives; on their physical health, mental health, housing and social relationships. In this chapter we consider the intended and the unintended consequences of sanctions.

7.1 Intended outcomes: increased compliance and moving closer to the labour market

Respondents were asked a series of questions about the extent to which the threat of being sanctioned and the experience of being sanctioned had prompted changes in their behaviour such that they were more likely to comply with the conditions that would ultimately improve their chances of securing work

The *possibility* of being sanctioned amongst respondents subject to conditionality had prompted changes in behaviour. For example, respondents reported it had made them more likely to:

- Turn up for appointments (72 per cent of all JSA and ESA WRAG claimants, base: 512)
- Turn up on time (72 per cent)

- Take more notice of what their advisor asked them to do (63 per cent).
- Apply for jobs (60 per cent, or 71 per cent of JSA claimants)
- Look for jobs more often (55 per cent, or 64 per cent of JSA claimants)
- Attend the courses/training they were told to attend (53 per cent)
- Find a job (20 per cent, or 23 per cent of JSA claimants)

Only a minority of respondents (16 per cent) did not report being influenced by the threat of sanction in at least one of these ways - good news, perhaps, for the policy. Interview respondents also described making more concerted efforts to seek work following a sanction, to pay more attention to the detail of what their Work Coach asked them to do, and to check and double check appointment dates and times.

Unfortunately analysis revealed very little about those groups most likely to be influenced by the threat of sanction. Looking at the profile of respondents influenced in at least one of the above ways (431), compared with all other claimants subject to conditionality (81), there were very few differences, including no stark differences between JSA and ESA WRAG claimants.³¹ The only exceptions relate to distance from the labour market and educational qualifications, in perhaps counterintuitive ways:

- Those changing their behaviour in these ways in response to the possibility

³¹ The number of respondents subject to conditionality, aware of the possibility of being sanctioned and not influenced by this threat was small – just 81 (out of 512) which might explain why sub-group analysis revealed few differences. For this reason we are reluctant to conclude that any one group is more or less influenced by the threat or sanction.

of a sanction were less likely to have educational/vocational qualifications (62 per cent, compared with 73 per cent); and

- They were less likely to have had a regular job in the past five years (53%, compared with 62 per cent).

When considering behavioural change outcomes of actual sanctions, results are broadly similar, although the proportions changing their behaviour were lower, and substantially lower for finding a job. This is somewhat counterintuitive: one might expect the experience of being sanctioned to provide greater, not lesser, incentive to future compliance. Of all those sanctioned in the past year:

- 60 per cent made sure they turned up on time
- 58 per cent made sure they turned up for appointments
- 56 per cent took more notice of what they were asked to do.
- 45 per cent looked for jobs more often
- 42 per cent started attending the courses/training they were told to attend
- 7 per cent found a job

The sanctions system is premised upon the notion that some individuals need coaxing, and need the threat of sanctions, to engage in work-related activity. However, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, the willingness to engage with the system already existed and sanctions were often imposed because of systemic problems, inappropriate requirements, missing communication (letters), and honest mistakes. In-depth interviews with sanctioned respondents suggests that they often did make even more concerted efforts to comply following a sanctioning - checking appointment times

more carefully, recording job search activity more rigorously - but their disposition was unchanged, because they were already positively disposed to taking advantage of support and training, and towards seeking work.

Thus, amongst those who felt they were capable of work, when asked whether the threat or experience of sanction made them more likely to look for or take up a job, a common refrain was yes, but 'I've always tried to work anyway' (Graham). As Maggie explained when asked if being sanctioned had any influence on her efforts to comply with her conditions:

I did that anyway but make sure I look at plenty of jobs, which I did, make sure I did what the letters said, basically that's just what I do. (Maggie)

It is also important to make clear that the threat and/or experience of being sanctioned did prompt behaviour change in some respondents but only through instilling fear and anxiety. In these instances respondents were complying, not because their attitude toward job-seeking had changed but because they were terrified at the prospect of living again with no income. To describe this as positive behaviour change is dubious:

It was torture going up to the jobcentre... you're a nervous wreck, you don't sleep the night before it. (Graham)

My anxiety affects me, I get really bad panic attacks...the night before my sign on I can't sleep, I feel like I'm thinking about it so much, and so anxious. (Anisa)

7.2 Unintended outcomes: overview

In addition to the 'intended consequences' of sanctioning, being sanctioned had a series of wider impacts on respondents' lives. The consequences of living 'hand to mouth', over a sustained period of time in some instances, were severe and evidence emerged from this

study that being sanctioned increased the chance of respondents becoming homeless, and it impacted on mental and physical health; self-esteem and confidence; family relationships and parenting; work-related and other behaviours; financial circumstances; and engagement with the labour market.

Figure 7.1 shows that three quarters of those who had been sanctioned reported that it had negatively impacted on their mental health and 64 per cent said it had affected their physical health in a negative way. Being sanctioned also impacted negatively on the very things that the conditionality and sanctions regime is meant to positively influence: respondents' ability to look for work (60 per cent); secure or maintain a job (53 per cent); and continue with training or courses (42 per cent). Half of all respondents sanctioned felt it had had a negative effect on their ability to maintain permanent or temporary housing. It can also be seen clearly that the prevalence of negative effects on ESA WRAG claimants was greater in every

instance than for JSA claimants.

Survey evidence suggests that **it is the most vulnerable who are impacted the worst.**

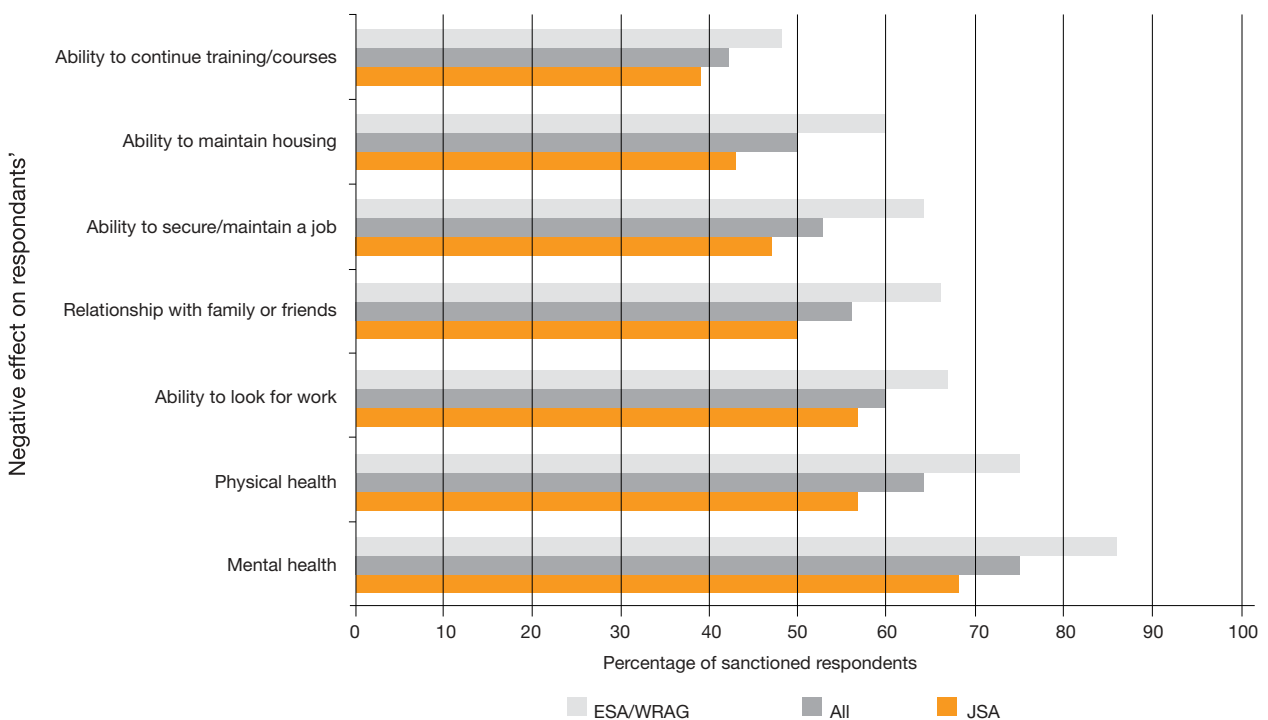
We can see from the statistics presented that ESA WRAG respondents were more likely than JSA respondents to report negative effects but respondents with mental health problems or alcohol/drug dependency were also more likely than those without these issues to report each of these negative effects as a result of being sanctioned.

The experiences of qualitative interview respondents concurred with those reported by survey respondents but the impact of being sanctioned on mental health and well-being, and on housing, emerged particularly strongly. The remainder of this chapter considers some of these 'unintended consequences' of sanctions.

7.3 Housing and homelessness

A significant number of survey and interview respondents reported that being sanctioned

Figure 7.1. Did being sanctioned have a negative impact on any of the following?



had detrimentally affected their housing situation. This was true for those who were permanently housed at the time of their sanction and those living in temporary accommodation. **Half of all sanctioned survey respondents said being sanctioned had a negative effect on their ability to maintain their permanent or temporary housing** (JSA: 43 per cent, ESA WRAG: 60 per cent). Predominantly, this was because respondents struggled to pay their rent or service charges while sanctioned, as was the case for Lee and Jonathan:

I had my own property and cos Housing Benefit's not getting paid that's got took off me, I was made homeless... (Lee)

I lived in the Salvation Army [hostel], that's when I got my first sanction...I got evicted from the Salvation Army coz I couldn't pay my rent. (Jonathan)

Housing Benefit (HB) entitlement is usually unaffected by a benefit sanction. The exception is claimants subject to intermediate sanctions. Intermediate sanctions are imposed on JSA claimants who fail to be available for work or actively seeking work. Eligibility for JSA relies upon a claimant being available for and actively seeking work and so these claimants become *disentitled* to JSA and their claim is cancelled. The sanction is then imposed when they reclaim. Because there has been an interruption to eligibility, all passported benefits, including HB, will also cease and a fresh claim has to be made.

In practice, however, HB claims are sometimes suspended when low and high level sanctions are imposed, as well as intermediate sanctions. This is because sanctioned claims are included in the daily automatic notification sent by DWP to local authorities of JSA/ESA claims that have 'stopped'. Unable to easily distinguish sanctioned claims from claims that have stopped for reasons of eligibility (where

entitlement to HB is also likely to be affected), local authorities often suspend all these HB claims pending further information.

This issue was highlighted by Matthew Oakley in his independent review of JSA Benefit Sanctions in 2014 (Oakley, 2014) and, in its response to the review, the Government committed to resolve the problem in the short term by ensuring that claimants are advised to keep the local authority informed of their circumstances; and in the long term by implementing an IT fix (DWP 2014). When the Work and Pensions Committee questioned the Minister for Employment in February 2015 about progress on this issue she explained that DWP had investigated 300 cases and found no evidence of this occurring and announced the problem resolved (Work and Pensions Committee, 2015). However, incidences have continued to emerge and, in response, DWP are working internally and with local authorities and charitable organisations to understand and rectify this problem. In early October DWP issued an urgent circular to local authorities confirming that sanctioned claimants should continue to receive HB without interruption, indicating that the problem has been continuing.

Information from claimants and stakeholders certainly suggests that the problem persists, and that DWP are right to continue with their efforts to better understand the issue. A senior officer interviewed from the organisation providing the Housing Benefit service in one large city, for example, confirmed that (at May 2015) an automated system suspends the HB of most of the 100 or so notifications they receive daily from DWP of 'stopped' claims, and generates a letter, sent to the claimant, asking them for further information. If they do not hear from the claimant within a month the HB claim is cancelled and in the meantime it is suspended.

This chimes with the experiences of survey and interview respondents. **More than**

one-third of the 146 survey respondents claiming HB when they were sanctioned reported that their HB stopped as a result (JSA: 35 per cent, ESA WRAG: 38 per cent). In some cases this may have been the result of an intermediate sanction, but certainly not in all. ESA WRAG respondents, for example, are not subject to intermediate sanctions and, of the similar proportion of interview respondents whose HB stopped following a sanction, very few appeared to have had an intermediate sanction imposed.

Very few interview respondents understood accurately the relationship between their JSA/ESA sanction and HB claim - as the quotes below illustrate - and so most failed to take the action necessary to maintain their claim. Very few were advised by Jobcentre Plus to contact the HB department (although in some cases respondents' HB continued despite taking no action) and those who eventually contacted the HB department often did so only when they received notification of arrears from their landlord or hostel provider. Some had given it no thought at all, others assumed their HB was also subject to the sanction and expected it to cease, and others assumed it was unaffected and would continue without any action being needed. Some respondents thought it depended on the area you lived in, or the length of the sanction. The extent of misapprehension is illustrated in the quotes below:

When they stop your benefit totally you're not entitled to Housing Benefit any more so you cannae pay your rent. (Alistair)

I think what it depends on is the council... this is Leamington Spa...if you went 20 miles down the road to Coventry then everything gets stopped, Housing Benefit, everything so I think it depends on the council. (Dennis)

They [HB] carried on cos it was such a short period...if I hadn't phoned the Work Programme the next day that would

have been it, I would have been properly sanctioned, not just a couple of weeks, it would have been months and then Housing Benefit would have been affected, Council Tax. (Lewis)

Under the misapprehension that HB eligibility ceases along with a sanction, some respondents were reluctant to tell their hostel provider they had been sanctioned, fearing this could jeopardise their accommodation. This was true of Melanie who explained that '*I was scared about telling them cos I'm always scared of losing my bed here*'. As a result, she did not access timely help and advice from hostel workers that could have prevented her arrears building up, such as help to appeal her sanction, or advice to contact the HB department to have HB reinstated.

Claimants whose HB continues to be paid, and those who are not claiming HB are also at risk of falling behind with their housing costs. This is because some housing costs are covered from JSA/ESA income, rather than HB. For example:

HB does not always fully cover a tenant's rent, even for those on a passported benefit (i.e. eligible for 'full' HB). Recent changes, including the lowering of the rent rate payable to private rented sector tenants and the Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy (known as the 'bedroom tax') have left many tenants with a shortfall to make up from other income. Gerry, for example, was living in a private rented flat when he was sanctioned. His rent was £98 per week but the rate payable (the 'Local Housing Allowance') by HB was £78 so Gerry paid £20 per week from his JSA, a sum he could no longer pay once he was sanctioned.

'Rent' sometimes includes charges for services or amenities that HB does not cover. This is true in most homelessness hostels, where residents pay around £10-£15 each week from other income for service charges. Rick, for example, was living in a hostel

where he had to pay a service charge of £15 a week. Once he was sanctioned this proved impossible and he stopped paying *‘which is why I got thrown out’*.

Homeless people staying temporarily with friends or relatives sometimes make an informal financial contribution (board and lodging) from their JSA/ESA to that household. This was true of Martin, who was asked to leave when his sanction prevented him from contributing any longer.

People who have previously accrued arrears often have an arrangement with their landlord to repay a small amount each week a commitment they meet from JSA/ESA income. In some cases such arrangements must be honoured to avoid eviction. Stuart and his brother were joint tenants who were eventually evicted for rent arrears. Both received sanctions. Stuart explained that *‘we did have a payment plan but even with that my brother was getting sanctioned again and again as well so it just couldn’t work.’*

If we consider the numbers of respondents whose HB stopped when they were sanctioned, and the fact that JSA/ESA income is often used to cover some housing costs it is perhaps no surprise that **nearly half of sanctioned survey respondents reported falling behind with their housing costs as a result of being sanctioned** (see Table 7.1). This included rent, service charges, and informal financial contributions made to households with whom a respondent was staying temporarily. It is worth remembering here that not all sanctioned respondents will have been liable for housing costs at the time of their sanction (including those sleeping rough or staying with friends without financial obligation) and so the proportion of those with housing costs who fell into arrears will be higher.

The level of arrears respondents accrued varied, depending on the length of their

sanction, whether and how quickly they contacted the HB department, whether they received a letter from the HB department notifying them of HB suspension (very few did), whether and how quickly they successfully appealed their sanction, and how quickly their landlord made them aware of arrears accruing. Interview respondents reported arrears ranging from around £100 to £4,000. At least four interview respondents had accrued arrears of more than £1,000 on their own tenancy as a result of being sanctioned, only one of whom had been in arrears at that address previously.

Not paying one’s rent carries with it serious risk of eviction and, therefore, of homelessness. Anyone failing to pay their rent will be breaching the condition of their tenancy/residency. Table 7.1 shows that **for 21 per cent of sanctioned survey respondents, not being able to pay housing costs meant having to leave their temporary or permanent accommodation** (this was true for a higher proportion of ESA WRAG claimants than JSA claimants: 27 per cent and 17 per cent respectively).

When asked directly, **21 per cent of sanctioned survey respondents said they became homeless as a result of being sanctioned** but had not been homeless immediately before their sanction and **16 per cent said they had to sleep rough as a result of the sanction**, but had not been sleeping rough immediately before their sanction. Homelessness and rough sleeping resulting from a sanction were more common amongst ESA WRAG than JSA claimants: 28 per cent of ESA WRAG and 16 per cent of JSA claimants surveyed said they had become homeless as a result of being sanctioned and 22 per cent of ESA WRAG and 12 per cent of JSA claimants said they had slept rough as a result of being sanctioned.

A very similar picture emerged from the

in-depth interviews, as the following quotes illustrate:

I were £300 in arrears, got given 24 hour notice to leave cos of rent arrears so I did. (Joe)

I had a private let house with X housing association [for 6 years] and cos I've had sanctions and getting my Housing Benefit stopped my debt went up to thousands of pounds...in February we got evicted. (Stuart)

In total, 12 of the 42 people interviewed had been evicted from their accommodation as a result of being sanctioned. In all cases, respondents had been unable to maintain rent (usually) or service charge payments, and accrued arrears beyond a level acceptable to their landlord or temporary housing provider. In one further instance, a respondent had been asked to leave his girlfriend's parents' house where he was staying temporarily because he could no longer contribute financially to the household. Of the 13 respondents who had to leave their accommodation, eight had been living in their own tenancies. These respondents therefore became homeless as a direct result of being sanctioned. One further respondent was under threat of eviction from his housing association tenancy at the time of his interview and others had rent or service charge arrears steadily accruing.

Several of those who had lost settled accommodation as a result of being sanctioned had previously been homeless but, until their sanction, were sustaining their tenancy. For these respondents, being sanctioned reversed a positive trajectory, undermining the efforts of the respondent and the organisations who had advised and worked with them - sometimes over many years - to escape homelessness and overcome associated problems. Ja made this point in relation to his own circumstances. He had experienced a sustained period of homelessness (during which he managed to work consistently) after the breakdown of his marriage and a couple of years ago had secured a Housing Association flat. He was under threat of eviction at the time of his interview:

You're playing with people's lives, do you realise what you're doing to them, somebody who's been homeless and has just got his stability back. He's getting his life back, trying to build himself up on stepping stones. He's ill already so basically you've made matters worse and you're just knocking him back down all the time. (Ja)

Ross, similarly, had been homeless for 10 years following an accidental fire in his home (during this time Ross also had mental health and drug dependency issues). When he met

Table 7.1. Did receiving a sanction affect your housing situation in any of the following ways?

	%
I got behind with the rent in my temporary accommodation and was evicted	13
I got behind with the rent in my temporary accommodation but was not evicted	16
I got behind with the rent in my own accommodation and my tenancy was terminated/not renewed/I was evicted	4
I got behind with the rent in my own accommodation but I was not evicted/my tenancy was not terminated	9
I could no longer stay with family or friends as I had no money to contribute	4
None of the above	51
Don't know/not sure	3
Total	100

Base 212

his partner they moved into a rented flat together and she became pregnant. They suffered a great sadness when she was knocked down by a car, seriously injured, and lost their baby. Ross was then sanctioned following a mix up about the location of an appointment (see Box 3.1 in Chapter 3) and his Housing Benefit stopped being paid. Ross explained that ‘after that it was sanction upon sanction’ although from the details he provided it seems there were also a series of other complications with his claim that, combined with sanction periods, left him with no income for more a year. With £4,000 of rent arrears they were evicted just before Christmas, less than two years after Ross had secured settled housing after a decade of homelessness (See Figure 7.2):

I’ve had enough, I’m nearly having a breakdown. It’s been a 10 year uphill struggle and I’m still homeless and everything I’ve been through, it’s all been stacked against me. (Ross)

A similar pattern was evident amongst homeless respondents who had previously been sleeping rough, who had accessed a hostel as a first step towards settled accommodation, but had to return to rough sleeping when they accrued rent or service charge arrears.

7.4 Mental and physical health

The experience of having benefits sanctioned had an effect on the mental health of most respondents. **Three quarters of the survey respondents who had been sanctioned said this had a negative impact on their mental health** and mental health impacts on some interview respondents were also clear.

When asked to rank the effects of being sanctioned, 51 per cent identified mental health impacts, and 40 per cent identified physical health impacts, as one of the three main negative effects of being sanctioned, more than any other effect.

Many sanctioned respondents already suffered problems such as depression, anxiety, stress and panic attacks and some had diagnoses of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. We know for example that 45 per cent of respondents reporting mental ill health were sanctioned. Many were managing their illnesses effectively. The experience of being sanctioned, however, exacerbated these problems, occasionally to the point where respondents could no longer function. Respondents reported experiencing high and increased levels of anxiety when trying to deal with the impact of having little or no money on which to survive day-to-day. Those already struggling with mental health issues reported not being able to cope with the added and very real burden of being cut off from any means of welfare support. For those with a history of mental health issues, being sanctioned was a wholly negative experience which often resulted in increased depression. This led a significant minority to contemplate and carry out self-harming, and in the most extreme cases, suicide. Ja’s experience illustrates this point (see Box 7.1.) as he describes in graphic terms the mental health impact of his sanction and the wait to have his benefits.

Ja wasn’t the only respondent who had a severe deterioration in his mental health to the point where he felt he could cope no longer and contemplated or carried out self-harm. Ross also explained that ‘I feel like topping myself rather than go through another day’ although, unlike Ja, he did not act on these feelings.

In the same vein, feeling increasingly vulnerable and socially isolated was also a common experience, as articulated by Helena:

It’s just upsetting, when you’re alone you can’t do anything against it. You feel more vulnerable than you did before. (Helena)

Being at the receiving end of sustained scrutiny and conditionality from Jobcentre Plus and/or the Work Programme was a source of anxiety for many and this could intensify following a sanction. Once respondents had experienced the difficulties of living without benefit income and, in some cases, been sanctioned despite best efforts to meet requirements or for unavoidable reasons (see Chapter 3) respondents became much more fearful of the prospect of being sanctioned again. Going to Jobcentre Plus and having appointments with job advisors/ Work Coaches were particular triggers for the onset of stress, and in a couple of instances, panic attacks. Anisa describes her increased anxiety at the thought of going to Jobcentre Plus in the following excerpt:

I suffer a lot from anxiety and I get panic attacks and I work myself up and when I get there it could be really simple but I just work myself up when I know it's someone I don't know, saying 'you haven't done it right' or whatever. I think ever since I got the sanction it's made my anxiety a lot worse... (Anisa)

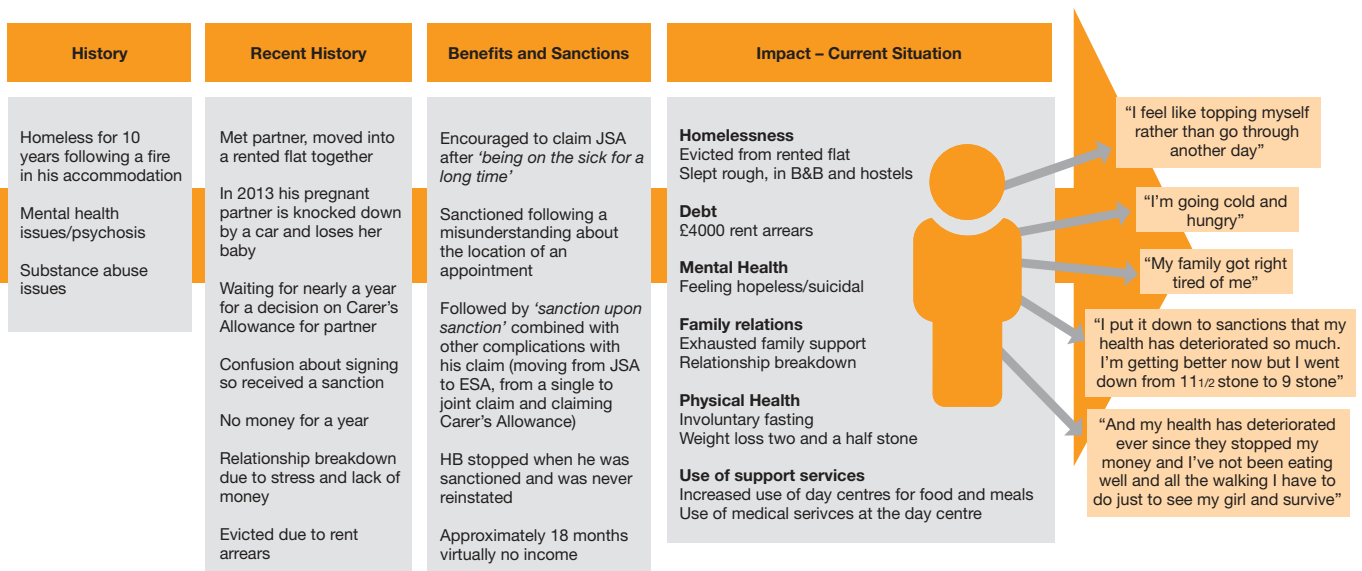
By virtue of their precarious housing situations, our participants were already in a vulnerable position, which was exacerbated

by benefit sanctions and the attendant conditionality regime. People reported feeling harassed by the constant need to comply with onerous JSA and to a lesser extent ESA WRAG conditions. It was hardly surprising then that many of them felt their confidence was undermined when they failed to meet their requirements. It was difficult for some people to keep up with the level of correspondence and demands for documentation, which had a deleterious effect on their self-esteem. Helena expresses the effect on her efforts to remain confident and retain her self-esteem in the face of an over-bearing benefits regime:

The people [at Jobcentre Plus] don't really know you, they could make false assumptions, I have so much going on I feel like... these letters make it worse, instead of trying to be confident I feel like these letters, being pushed down, it just gets down, down and I don't know how I'm going to feel if this situation isn't resolved for me. (Helena)

The effects of being sanctioned on participants' physical health were also notable, although not easily measurable. As Ross described it 'my health has deteriorated ever since they stopped my money and I've

Figure 7.2 Ross



not been eating well and all the walking I have to do just to see my girl and to survive.’

Negative physical health effects were evident mostly in relation to ‘involuntary fasting’; and insomnia and lack of sleep, as described by Anisa in section 7.1. In total, 64 per cent of the survey sample reported a negative impact on their physical health. Going without food, in effect ‘involuntary fasting’ was a recurring theme in people’s narratives. Intermittent and involuntary fasting, as a strategy for coping (as discussed in Chapter 6) with time-limited access to food, had a negative impact on people’s health. Significant weight loss was not uncommon. This was discussed in visceral, corporeal terms by Ja, who described the experience of being able to eat only on certain days and certain times (at soup kitchens and other drop-in centres run by the voluntary sector), and the physical effects on his body. He described significant weight loss (4 stone) and shrinking appetite so that even when a meal was available he felt physically unable to eat it. Ja explained that not having eaten from Saturday morning to Sunday evening, when faced with a large meal ‘you can’t even eat that meal cos your belly’s that full already cos you’ve swelled your stomach up’.

7.5 Family, parenting and social relationships

Being at the receiving end of benefit sanctions affected the individual claimant but also had an impact on their family and friends. In many cases family members, including parents and siblings, were the first port of call as people found themselves unable to meet their most basic needs. We saw in Chapter 6 that 64 per cent of survey respondents borrowed from friends or family as a result of having their benefit stopped due to being sanctioned. The family, in effect, stepped in to make up for the loss of benefits which were needed for the minimum level of shelter and sustenance. Most often they extended support to participants in desperate circumstances, in buying food and covering

gas and electricity costs, in the short term.

However, reliance on family members, who were often financially overstretched themselves, was far from desirable and came with an emotional cost. Priya puts into words the difficulty she had relying on her grandmother who was also struggling to make ends meet:

When I first came in the hostel there was some pasta and some sauces and bits and bats off my nan...but it’s come to a point where they’re struggling and saying ‘you’ve got to get this sorted out’. (Priya).

Accepting hand-outs from family engendered a complex mixture of feelings: guilt and frustration at having to ask for help were not uncommon. In some cases there was also an awareness that their goodwill could not be relied on indefinitely. Ultimately, the strain it put on family relationships was significant. It led to arguments, relationship breakdown, and friendships turning sour:

My girlfriend’s parents, they fed me, gave me lifts everywhere [...] ruined my relationship with them [...] [My girlfriend] said ‘it would be best if you move out of my parents’ house’... (Martin)

My family got right tired of me ‘cos there’s only so much they could do. (Ross)

*I borrowed off one of our pals [...] but he changed so fast from all buddy buddy to “I need the f***ing money”. (Sonia)*

It is also worth noting here that family and friends can, in general terms, provide vital support to people experiencing homelessness. This is evident just from looking at the proportion of those surveyed who were staying with friends and family (20 per cent of all homeless survey respondents). If being sanctioned is negatively affecting these relationships it could lead to the erosion of an important source of support

with potential long-term implications for levels of rough sleeping and demand on voluntary and statutory services.

More broadly, being at the receiving end of sanctions had an impact on individuals' social relationships and their ability to stay connected, which were vital for the mental health of our participants. Maggie articulates how being cut off from her friends (she did not have the money to visit them as they lived some distance away) had made her more depressed, which in turn impacted on her ability to seek work.

All my friends were at Dinnington at the time, I had no friends over here, I used to go to Dinnington to see my friend, I couldn't do that, that made me more depressed. (Maggie)

Being sanctioned also had a serious and potentially long-term effect on individuals' relationship with their children, and their ability to fulfil their duties as a responsible parent. It affected the amount of time parents could spend with their children and, in some cases, whether they were able to do so at all.

We have already seen that the demands placed upon respondents to meet conditionality requirements affected respondents' parenting of their children. In Chapter 3, for example, we saw that William '*pushed everything out of the way just to meet the target [for job applications], like going and seeing my kids*' (see Box 3.1 in Chapter 3). William's ex-partner subsequently refused to let him see his children because he failed to keep to the arrangements during the time he was trying to meet the conditions of his Claimant Commitment. Maggie, similarly described limited contact with her children because of the requirement to spend seven days a week job-seeking:

I couldn't take my kids out as well cos you're expected seven days a week to do it

[job seeking], if you've got children, I mean my children don't live with me but a lot of times I couldn't take them out anywhere cos I had to be busy looking for work... I spent a bit of time with them, with kids, but it made it more difficult. (Maggie)

Once sanctioned, respondents were similarly unable to meet parenting commitments. At least four respondents (three fathers and one mother) were unable to see their children as a result of being sanctioned, with longer term consequences for their access to and relationship with those children. Having their benefit sanctioned left respondents without sufficient funds to visit, feed, or take out their children and they had to cease or reduce contact as a result (see Anisa and Phillip's in Box 7.2.)

Ja's moving account below gives some idea of the emotional 'turmoil' of foregoing contact with his son as a result of being unable to look after him properly (he couldn't feed him and he had no heating or hot water, having disconnected his gas). Ja's 10 year old son stayed with him every weekend but during the many months that Ja was sanctioned this was put under significant strain as Ja could not afford to feed him. Not wanting to tell his ex-partner or son about his sanction, Ja pretended all his money was going towards bills, and he borrowed money and food until all avenues were exhausted. Come the point when Ja's cupboard was completely bare, his son would go home hungry and Ja faced accusations of neglect from his ex-partner. When Ja admitted he had been sanctioned, his son started bringing money to pay for his own food. Ja, in effect, became dependent upon his son bringing money to feed them both, a situation he could not tolerate and so the situation escalated until Ja ceased contact with his son for six months. The impact on Ja's mental health has been discussed above. As he hints here, it had a significant impact on his relationship with his son and is a stark reminder that the impact of benefit sanctions extend well beyond the individual:

Yeah so that's when I had to... it's not fair on him and it's not fair on his mum, she can't keep giving him money and stuff, she's got her own stuff, so you have to make a decision, it's not the right decision sometimes but when you're in a turmoil and your mental health's playing with you as well it's like... yeah so for about six months we didn't see each other, we're just basically rebuilding now. (Ja)

7.6 Increasing distance from the labour market: undermining efforts to seek work

We saw earlier in this chapter (see 7.1.) that sanctions did prompt respondents to more actively seek work and increase compliance with their conditionality requirements, which will include work-related activity such as attending training and courses, receiving help compiling CVs and generally preparing for work and improving employability (see Chapter 8 for discussion of the effectiveness of some of this support). Increased engagement was viewed positively by some and will have brought them closer to the labour market.

However, perversely, **the experience and detrimental impact of sanctions - and of the conditionality regime more generally was also found to push people further from the labour market, or decrease their chances of securing work.** There was strong evidence to suggest that the conditionality and sanctions regime was mitigating against engagement with the labour market with the majority (60 per cent) of survey respondents reporting that being sanctioned had a negative effect on their ability to look for work. In addition, more than half (53 per cent) said it had negatively affected their ability to secure and/or maintain a job; and 42 per cent reported that being sanctioned had a negative effect on their ability to continue with any training/courses/groups they were on.

The last of these points is important for, as we

reported in Chapter 2, many homelessness service users were already taking steps to move closer to the labour market, often by drawing on the help of support workers or by attending courses and sessions offered by homelessness and other voluntary sector organisations. It is a perverse outcome indeed if the operation of a system designed to encourage more people to work in fact prevents them from continuing or embarking on the activities that will help them do so.

Interview data suggest two principal reasons why respondents were unable to continue with their existing work-related activity:

- The stress of being sanctioned and the practical efforts required to meet basic needs (access food, warmth, washing facilities and such like) sapped energy, motivation, and time (see Helena's experience below); and
- Respondents travelling some distance to attend sessions could not afford travel costs.

Participants who had been sanctioned also found that having to apply for jobs they were clearly not qualified for, and had no hope of attaining, was another barrier to finding employment. Mandatory universal job searches, while time-consuming and frustrating, yielded almost no responses for the majority, let alone a job interview. The system appeared to be focused entirely on targets being met rather than an individualised job search tailored to each individual claimant.

However, one of the clearest ways in which respondents were pushed further from the labour market by their experience of being sanctioned was through the detrimental impact of being sanctioned on mental health, physical health, self-esteem and well-being. We have already made the point above that deteriorating physical and, in particular, mental health as a result of being sanctioned was relatively common, yet

health is a key influence on people's labour market capabilities. We have reported fairly extensively on Ja's experiences and circumstances already in this chapter. Here we can complete the picture by contrasting his 'fitness' for work before his first sanction and at the end of the 14 months during which he was sanctioned.

When Ja first claimed JSA less than 18 months ago he had been working in a series of jobs for 15 years, including during a relatively long period of homelessness following the breakdown of his relationship. As we saw above (see Box 7.1) he had always been prone to bouts of depression but had managed these well enough to maintain his work, relationships and parenting. Ja had no support needs aside from this and was finally settled in a Housing Association flat he secured about two years ago. He had to leave his last job (a temporary job with the local authority on a zero hours

contract) because of an injury and claimed JSA, imagining that as soon as he had recovered he would find work again, as he always had done. The combined effect of a series of sanctions (for missed appointments for which Ja received no notification) and confusion around an ESA claim left Ja with no income for 10 of the past 14 months. His Housing Benefit also stopped and at the time of his interview he was under threat of eviction. During this time his mental health deteriorated significantly, particularly after he had to cease contact with his son. Ja's son is his only family and they are very close so this hit Ja very hard. He attempted suicide twice and suffered a stress-related heart attack (he is 36 years old). Ja is unlikely to be able to enter the labour market any time soon - a stark contrast with his situation when he signed on for the first time in 15 years less than two years ago.

Box 7.1: The impact of sanctions on mental health

Ja says that *'I always knew from being 20 odd year old that there was summat wrong with me'*. He found himself feeling very depressed at times but managed his fluctuating mood and periods of deep depression well, maintaining a relatively stable and contented life, despite a lengthy period of homelessness following the breakdown of his relationship. He continued working during this period and maintained a close relationship with his son. Ja eventually moved into a Housing Association flat and his son started staying with him most weekends. Following an accident he had to stop working while he recovered and signed on. He was soon sanctioned for failing to attend an appointment and then sanctioned again for the same reasons (he had not received the letters). During this time he also experienced disruption to his benefit because of confusion around moving from JSA to ESA.

The stress of the situation - of having no money, of mounting debt (including to loan sharks), of the threat of losing his home (his HB stopped and his landlord instigated possession proceedings), and of trying to understand the details of his claim and his

sanction so he could take appropriate action - had a significant effect on Ja's mental health. When he had to stop seeing his son (he could not afford to feed him or heat his home when he stayed) he hit rock bottom. Ja described his descent into depression:

Yeah by this point it would have been March, April, May, going into June so then June, July no money still, no letters telling me why no money, I've gone into depression, what happens with me is cos I hate the world and sometimes all I do is bury my head and so I was no food, nothing, no eating, nothing for a time...I was getting really depressed, down in the dumps, no money coming in, what do I do? ... and then realised that I was getting worse... so we went up to the mental health team, they diagnosed me with bipolar and a disorder they called borderline personality disorder as well, BPD.

Since Ja was first sanctioned less than 18 months ago he has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder, has made two suicide attempts and has spent a period under section in a psychiatric hospital. Shortly before he was interviewed he had suffered a stress-related heart attack. Ja is 36 years old.

7.7 Debt

We noted in Chapter 5 that borrowing was a common way in which respondents met their daily needs whilst sanctioned. We need not go over that again here, but it is important to note that when money is borrowed, it becomes a debt. Combined with the (sometimes significant) rent and service charge arrears accrued by respondents as a result of their sanction (see above), increased indebtedness is, therefore, a key 'unintended consequence' of the sanctions regime.

But this does not capture the extent of debt accrued. It was, for example, common for interview respondents living in their own tenancies to run up large water, gas and electricity bills. One respondent explained that he disconnected his gas - which was metered - because even if he used none a 'standing' charge was made, but his electricity was billed and so he continued usage. Most tenants, even those in receipt of full Council Tax Benefit, now have to pay a proportion of their Council Tax.

These debts remain, of course, once the sanction is lifted. Allowing rent arrears or electricity charges to accrue, or borrowing from friends as a way of 'getting through' a sanction may help in the short-term but has long term financial consequences. When he was interviewed, Ja had just received a letter saying his benefit was being reinstated but the amount he was to receive was much reduced because a sum was being taken as a direct deduction from his benefit to meet an arrangement with his landlord to repay the £1000 rent arrears he had accrued. This will make life very difficult for Ja who also has loan sharks knocking on his door, water and utility bills unpaid and furniture and white goods that need replacing (he sold them all).

It is also important to highlight that sanctions prevent people from maintaining repayment arrangements for existing debt, and other financial commitments. This includes payments for rent arrears (failing to keep up

with such arrangements can result in eviction) Council Tax and court fines (failure to pay these can result in a custodial sentence), as well as maintenance payments, loans and credit payments.

Although not a widespread practice, some respondents did take out high interest loans as a way of coping while sanctioned (19 per cent of those surveyed). Interview respondents generally recognised that such loans would have to be paid back at extortionate rates and would only make their financial situation worse in the long-run but, nevertheless, at least two took a loan from unregulated and/or high interest lenders. These respondents had been without any income for so long that their financial situation forced them to take desperate measures:

I had to take out a Provident Loan because I've no money. But it's not just 2 per cent; it's like 100 per cent. But I had to take it because I had no money. (Douglas)

7.8 Key points

- The core objective of the conditionality and sanctions regime is to support more people into work. Government rationale for the use of sanctions is that

Box 7.2: Impact of sanctions on parenting and contact with children

Phillip has an arrangement to see his one year old son once a week, visiting him at home in a neighbouring town. When Phillip was sanctioned for being 15 minutes late to sign on he could no longer afford the weekly train fare. Initially, Phillip 'jumped the train', travelling without a ticket, but he was caught and fined, a fine he has no way of paying by the deadline, and so he doesn't risk that again.

Anisa has a four year old daughter who lives with her father. Anisa is currently living in a hostel where children are prohibited from visiting and so when she sees her daughter she has to take her out. This proved very difficult while Anisa was sanctioned, unless she could borrow money - which she occasionally could - to take her daughter out.

they are effective in changing behaviour that will, in turn, reduce unemployment. 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 and seek work. However, being sanctioned also had a series of 'unintended' impacts on respondents' lives.

- 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. In part, this is because for some claimants Housing Benefit ceases to be

paid when they are sanctioned, or people can no longer make up the HB shortfall with JSA/ESA income.

- Sanctions exacerbated 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.
- Perversely, the experience and detrimental impact of sanctions - and of the conditionality regime more generally - was found to push some people further from the labour market, or decrease their chances of securing work. 60 per cent of survey respondents reported that being sanctioned had a negative effect on their ability to look for work and more than half (53 per cent) said it had negatively affected their ability to secure and/or maintain a job.
- Benefit sanctions can have an impact that extends far beyond the individual, fracturing relationships with friends, family, and children - relationships that in some cases are a crucial source of support to people while they are homeless.

Box 7.3. Impact of sanctions: limiting opportunities for work, education and training

Helena had been *'working on courses, I was really working hard on them, and a lot more than I think work club is going to help me'* at a local homelessness centre but she ceased this activity when she was sanctioned because *'I was so distressed I couldn't manage myself anymore'*. Her engagement with this homelessness organisation shifted from training courses and employment-related activity to meetings with a support worker to deal with the impact of her sanction (appeal, HB issues and such like).

Kyle missed out on a job opportunity because he could not afford to keep his mobile phone operational while he was sanctioned. Phones, and phone credit was considered a luxury and was often last respondents' list of priorities, making job searching and the chance of securing work very difficult. Kyle explained what happened to him:

I lost a trial shift in the 'Frog and Parrot', a restaurant. They said they tried to phone me and my phone was off and they hired someone else. It was a 28 hour kitchen porter job and it's not far away so that would have been good cos my hostel's just in town, I could have been there in 10 minutes.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

The evidence presented in this report begins to fill a crucial gap in the evidence base on benefit sanctions, generating robust evidence on the prevalence of sanctions amongst homeless people and their experiences of welfare conditionality. The results lend support to evidence already accumulated suggesting that homeless and vulnerable people are more likely to be sanctioned than the wider claimant population.

This is, perhaps, no surprise: many homelessness service users have vulnerabilities that make it difficult for them to navigate the rigidity and bureaucracy of any formal system, have a multitude of other commitments and concerns (seeking and applying for housing, appointments with drug advisors, health workers and support workers), and do not always have the resources necessary to 'play by the rules' (regular access to the internet, a reliable postal address, suitable clothes). However, the system is designed to account for variation in circumstances and capabilities, with conditionality requirements supposedly adjusted accordingly to create a level playing field, ensuring that more vulnerable people are not placed at a disadvantage and exposed to greater risk of sanction. It is designed to provide tailored support and assistance to help even those with significant barriers to labour market participation to improve their skills, confidence, and improve their opportunity and capability to work.

Yet this was not the experience of many of those participating in this study. In fact, some respondents' encounters with the benefit system pushed them further from, not closer to the labour market, as the stress of trying to comply with impossible requirements, or cope with being sanctioned, took its toll on respondents' mental and physical health, and respondents were prevented from continuing with meaningful work-related activity to attend courses that did little to improve their skills.

The results from this study have significant implications for welfare 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. Their capabilities appear misunderstood such that requirements placed upon them are inappropriate and almost certain to result eventually in a sanction. They are certainly not always '*reasonable... reflecting the claimant's particular capability and circumstances*' as policy dictates. The fact so many homelessness service users are being sanctioned (39 per cent) strongly suggests that sanctions are not working as a 'deterrent threat' for this client group. It is also clear from the evidence that few homelessness service users are sanctioned because they 'refuse to play by the rules'. Rather, they are hampered by a system that places unrealistic demands upon them, that fails to recognise and account for their circumstances and vulnerabilities, and that practises little discretion or flexibility. As we have seen, many sanctions occurred not because of 'behavioural failings' but because of systemic problems and inappropriate requirements that far exceeded respondents' capabilities and circumstances. 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.

The consequence is that people who are already vulnerable, or experiencing difficulties in their life, have vital support removed at a time they most need it, plunging them into debt, homelessness and poor health all of which impact on their capacity to work in the future.

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 (e.g. homelessness, deteriorating mental health, increased labour market detachment) the following changes and measures are required. The need for these changes is well evidenced by the results of this study. Some of these recommendations have relevance beyond homeless and vulnerable people.

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.

Appendix 1

Name	Summary of reason for sanctions ³²
Adam	Adam was sanctioned for failing to do the requisite job searching. He was actively seeking work but was doing so by delivering CVs in person. His Claimant Commitment specified he must job search online only. Adam is not IT proficient.
Alistair	Alistair was sanctioned for failing to attend the Work Programme. He had been placed in the WRAG but was disputing his classification and wrongly thought this exempted him. He is diagnosed with schizophrenia and has had drug and alcohol problems since his wife passed away a few years ago.
Amrit	Amrit was sanctioned for failing to attend the Work Programme. He had attended the same course (a 'Level 1' forklift course) previously and had not found it useful in terms of getting a job. He was keen, and had asked to do a higher level course but saw little point in repeating the basic course. He tried negotiating with his Work Coach on this point but to no avail.
Anisa	Anisa was sanctioned for failing to sign on. When told on a Thursday that her first signing date was Friday she assumed, wrongly, it would be the following week rather than the next day. As soon as she realised her mistake she contacted the Jobcentre.
Benjamin	Benjamin was sanctioned for failing to undertake the required level of job search. He had, in fact, satisfied the job search requirements but could not prove all of this activity because he had been asking for work in shops but had no formal record of this.
Brian	Brian is claiming ESA WRAG and failed to attend an appointment at the Work Programme. He understood from the benefits advisor that he didn't have to attend.
David	David was sanctioned for four weeks for failing to attend an appointment at JCP. David did not receive the letter informing him of his appointment.
Dennis	Dennis was sanctioned for not fulfilling his job search requirements. Dennis had fulfilled his job search criteria and had kept fastidious records (350 in the month the sanction was applied). Dennis was sanctioned twice more for the same reason. Dennis successfully appealed against each of these decisions.
Douglas	Douglas was sanctioned for failing to attend an appointment. He had not received the letter.
Faye	Faye was sanctioned for failing to attend the Work Programme. She had been unwell that day and had informed her Work Programme Provider by telephone of this.
Fred	Emergency childcare issues prevented Fred from signing on. He was asked at short notice to collect his daughter from school because his older daughter had gone into labour and her mother wanted to be at the hospital with her. He went in person to the Jobcentre the next day to explain. He had previously been sanctioned for failing to do the required job search online. Robert is not computer literate so was doing his computer searching with the help a worker at a local day centre but could not get enough time with the worker to fulfil his conditions.
Helena	Helena was sanctioned for failing to attend the Work Programme. Full details (directions, map, telephone number) were not provided, although the letter indicated they would be, so she did not know where to go. She contacted the Jobcentre and they promised to send her full details but when the second letter arrived this information was missing again.
Ja	Ja was sanctioned twice for failing to attend appointments for which he had received no notification.
Joe	Joe was sanctioned for failing to meet his job search requirements. He was clinically depressed at the time and had no motivation to seek work. He fully acknowledged that he 'couldn't be bothered' to meet his conditions. A few months later he was deemed unfit for work and awarded ESA because of his mental health issues.
Jonathan	Jonathan was sanctioned for four weeks for not looking for appropriate jobs. He had done the requisite job search but had applied for some jobs in his trade (race horse handling) that were not specified on his Claimant Commitment.

³² Respondents had often been sanctioned more than once. In interviews we concentrated on their most recent sanction but sometimes have information about previous sanctions also. These are sometimes used as examples elsewhere in the report and so will not always match the reasons for sanctions presented in this table.

Kyle	Kyle forgot to sign on and was sanctioned. He realised his mistake the following day and went to the Jobcentre.
Lee	Lee has had three sanctions, all for missing appointments. Lee has been very ill during this time, with cancer amongst other things, but has struggled to get the necessary medical evidence (mainly through being too ill to pursue it) to prove he was too unwell to attend.
Lewis	Lewis was sanctioned for failing to attend the Work Programme. Lewis did not attend because he had a job interview. He informed the Work Programme Provider of this but did not inform the Jobcentre and so was sanctioned. He successfully appealed.
Luke	Luke was sanctioned for missing an appointment. He was in hospital at the time having been assaulted.
Maggie	Maggie was sanctioned because she missed an appointment. She had just moved, becoming homeless because of an arson attack on her home. She informed the Jobcentre, but the letter was sent to her previous address. She was sanctioned again for failing to do the requisite job search. Maggie really struggled with the requirements. A few months later she was deemed unfit for work and awarded ESA.
Martin	Martin was sanctioned for failing to sign on. He informed the Jobcentre that he would be away Friday to Sunday (his signing on day was Friday) and was told to come and sign on on Monday instead. Martin was prepared to lose a proportion of his benefit for being unavailable for work while away but when he went on Monday he was told he was sanctioned.
Matthew	Matthew was sanctioned several times for failing to attend the Work Programme. He cares for his partner who has mental health problems and, because of this, he finds it difficult to consistently attend.
Melanie	Melanie was sanctioned because she forgot to sign on. She is 18 years old and was being evicted that day from the hostel where she had been living since leaving care.
Pete	Pete missed an appointment to sign on. He has numeracy and literacy issues so did not understand the electronic claim system.
Phillip	Phillip was sanctioned for being late (15 minutes) for signing on, having been stuck in traffic.
Priya	Priya was sanctioned for missing an appointment. She did not receive the letter informing her of the appointment, possibly because she was in the process of moving.
Rick	Rick was sanctioned for failing to meet job search requirements. He had met his conditions but had not completed his booklet to prove it.
Ross	Ross missed an appointment due to confusion about the location. He went to the wrong office, was told he had no appointment there, contacted his advisor immediately and was told his appointment was elsewhere, but once he arrived he had missed his allotted time.
Shawn	Shawn was sanctioned for not completing adequate job search. He has drug issues and found it too difficult to meet the requirements.
Simon	Simon was sanctioned for failing to do the requisite job searching. Simon has poor literacy and had difficulties understanding his Claimant Commitment.
Sonia	Sonia is not entirely sure why she was sanctioned but thinks she missed an appointment. At the time she had drug dependency issues and was living a chaotic life.
Stan	Stan was sanctioned (twice) for failing to attend appointments. On both occasions he got the dates confused and attended at the wrong time. He had alcohol issues at the time.
Vincent	Vincent was sanctioned for not responding to a letter concerning his ID. He did not receive the letter.
Thomas	Thomas was sanctioned for failing to sign on at his first signing on date. He had forgotten, not yet being in the routine of claiming benefits.
Tim	Tim has been sanctioned for missing appointments and for failing to do the requisite job search. Tim was sleeping rough and has mental health issues and found these requirements too difficult to meet. Soon after he was deemed unfit for work and awarded ESA, being placed in the Support Group.
William	William was sanctioned for failing to apply for enough jobs. He has borderline learning difficulties, mental ill health and poor computer literacy. A couple of months later William made a successful claim for ESA and was placed in the Support Group.

Statistical Appendix 2

Survey method

The survey was conducted in day centres for homeless people and in homeless hostels across England and Scotland. CRESR designed the survey, including the questionnaire, and undertook the analysis of the resultant dataset. The fieldwork was undertaken, managed and data entered by the professional survey company Qa Research. The questionnaire was administered face-to-face by professional interviewers with respondents in situ at each of the service providers within the sample. All service providers had been contacted, informed of the research and agreed to facilitate access to service users prior to the interview team arriving. All attendees at the service provider on one particular day were informed of the research and asked if they wished to take part in the survey. The fieldwork took place between February and April 2015.

A short screener was first administered to all respondents willing to take part to ensure all were of 'working age' in benefit terms (i.e. aged 16-64) and exclude those who were not eligible for benefits because of their immigration status. People not currently homeless were eligible to participate on the basis that their use of a homelessness service indicated a recent history of homelessness, a very precarious housing situation, or threat of homelessness. All survey respondents received a £5 'thank you' payment. On average the questionnaire typically took 15-20 minutes to administer. The data was entered onto and analysed using SPSS.

The sampling frame of service providers was chosen to cover a range of different types of locality, service types and providers in order to generate a large and robust sample. The sample reflects a cross section of homeless people living in different housing and geographical contexts and is not skewed unduly by specific or unique conditions in certain types of places. In

all, 39 homelessness service providers across 22 districts in ten regions agreed to take part in the survey. The districts were Birmingham, Liverpool, Bradford, Brighton, Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hull, Lambeth, Lancaster, Leeds, Leicester, Manchester, Newcastle, North East Lincolnshire, Perth, Rotherham, Salford, Sheffield, Warwick, Westminster and York.

In total, 1,013 usable interviews with respondents aged 16-64 were completed. 831 (82 per cent) with men and 182 with women (18 per cent). It is not possible to compare this figure directly with the gender profile for the entire GB population of service users of day centres and homeless hostels as this data does not exist. However, the 2011 Census does allow a gender profile of GB residents of working age in hostels for homeless or temporary shelters on Census night to be compared to those within the survey sample who were interviewed at drop in/night shelters or hostels - which accounted for 30 per cent of the overall sample. The gender profile for this sub sample was 72:28 males to females which is very close to the 69:31 ratio of males to females seen in the comparable group in the 2011 Census. This gives confidence that the sample is broadly representative of the gender split seen in the population of service users as a whole.

The age profile of the sub-sample within hostels and night/shelters was also broadly comparable to what is known of this population in the 2011 Census. Half of this sub-sample were aged 16-34, 34 per cent were aged 35-49 and 16 per cent were aged 50 or over. The comparable figures from the census were 64 per cent, 25 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. The sub-sample of working aged respondents interviewed at drop in/night shelters or hostels within the survey is therefore only slightly older than was seen in the 2011 Census. When the entire sample of 1,013 is considered,

this indicates an older age profile is seen amongst the users of day centres. This means for the sample of as a whole: 34 per

cent were aged 16-34, 44 per cent were aged 35-49 and 22 per cent were aged over 50.

Sample sizes

In total, 1,013 single homelessness service users aged 16-64 were surveyed between February and April 2015.

Full sample	1,013
<i>Benefits status</i>	
Claiming any benefits (currently or in past year)	961
JSA*	338
ESA WRAG*	213
All subject to conditionality	548
<i>Mental health</i>	
JSA with mental health problems	96
JSA without mental health problems	242
ESA WRAG with mental health problems	153
ESA WRAG without mental health problems	60
All subject to conditionality with mental health problems	246
All subject to conditionality without mental health problems	302
<i>Alcohol or drug dependency issues</i>	
JSA with alcohol or drug dependency issues	139
JSA without alcohol or drug dependency issues	199
ESA WRAG with alcohol or drug dependency issues	149
ESA WRAG without alcohol or drug dependency issues	64
All subject to conditionality with alcohol or drug dependency issues	286
All subject to conditionality without alcohol or drug dependency issues	262
<i>Circumstances of those subject to conditionality</i>	
All subject to conditionality and been in local authority care	132
All subject to conditionality with physical health problems or a disability	217
All subject to conditionality and experienced violence/abuse from a parent	132
All subject to conditionality and experienced violence/abuse from a partner	143
All subject to conditionality with problems reading or writing	136
All subject to conditionality and sleeping rough at time of survey	85
<i>Claimants sanctioned</i>	
JSA claimants sanctioned in past year	130
ESA WRAG claimants sanctioned in past year	85
All claimants sanctioned in past year	213
<i>Meeting conditionality</i>	
All subject to conditionality and finding it difficult to meet conditions	295
All subject to conditionality and not finding it difficult to meet conditions	173
JSA claimants finding it difficult to meet conditions	176
ESA WRAG claimants finding it difficult to meet conditions	121
All subject to conditionality and aware that not meeting conditions can lead to being sanctioned	512
<i>Housing Benefit</i>	
All claiming housing benefit when sanctioned	146
JSA claimants that were claiming HB when sanctioned	88
ESA WRAG claimants that were claiming HB when sanctioned	60

*3 respondents reported they claimed JSA and ESA. This may be due to changing benefits status over the past year. These respondents were included within the JSA and ESA sub-samples, but only counted once within the subject to conditionality group.

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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Homelessness ends here