

Learning lessons from lived experiences of Universal Credit

Presentation for the Lancashire County Council External Scrutiny Committee
21st January 2020

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Presentation overview

- Universal Credit: emerging issues
- Introducing our research projects
- Overview of some key findings

Universal Credit: emerging issues

Universal Credit: policy promises welcomed

‘the most important and fundamental reform since the inception of the welfare state’ (DWP, 2018)

- Reduce poverty
- Simplify the benefits system
- Ease movement in and out of work and taking on extra hours
- Financial incentives to ‘make work pay’

‘at the forefront of efforts by OECD countries to transform and modernise their activation policies’ (OECD, 2014: 13)

Universal Credit: emerging issues

- Calls for 'pause and fix' UC roll-out (2017 vote and 2018 Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Mayor of London)
- National Audit Office (2018) raised major concerns over UC
- Work allowances: cuts, freezes and worse taper rate than legacy benefits undermine work incentives (Brewer et al., 2017; CAB, 2018)
- Poverty increasing, 1 million more children in poverty (CPAG, 2017)
- Increasing food bank use, rent arrears and destitution (Trussell Trust, 2018; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2018)
- Lone parents lose out on £26 per week (Brewer, et al., 2017)
- Concern about gendered impacts (Bennett, 2012; Griffiths, 2018)

Universal Credit: some inherent tensions

Benefits for out of work adults JSA, ESA WRAG	Wage top-ups Working Tax Credit
DWP	HMRC
'Stigmatised'	'Respectable'
To coerce out of work ' dependents '	To enable ' willing workers '
Low rates to make unemployment uncomfortable	Rates intended to make work financially viable
Stick -based Disincentive built-in	Carrot -based Incentive built-in
Coercion aimed at moving 'off benefits' and 'into work'	Financial support to make paid work and child care possible
The use of conditions inc. sanctions	No behavioural job search conditions
<p>UC Combined conditionality for out of work and in-work claimants Stick based</p>	

Introducing our research projects

The *Welfare conditionality: Sanctions, Support & Behaviour Change* project (2013-2018)

Twin aims:

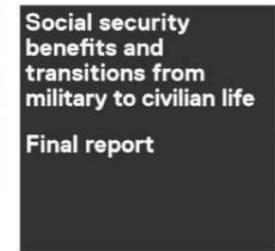
- To consider the ethics and efficacy of welfare conditionality
- Fieldwork with three sets of respondents:
 1. Semi-structured interviews with 52 policy stakeholders
 2. 27 focus groups with frontline welfare practitioners
 3. Three rounds of repeat qualitative longitudinal interviews with a diverse sample of (n. 481 wave a, total 1,082 interviews) welfare recipients who are subject to welfare conditionality

The *Sanctions, Support & Service Leavers* project

- Two year project (2017-2019) funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) – first substantive UK research to focus specifically on veterans’ experiences in the social security system

- **Methods**

- Semi-structured interviews with 20 policy/practice stakeholders
- Three focus groups with DWP staff (15 participants in total)
- 120 interviews with veterans (68 at Wave A; 52 at Wave B) claiming Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) and Universal Credit (UC)
- Interviews with individuals but also some spouses
- Fieldwork locations across North West, North East, Yorkshire and London
- Working with students in School of Arts & Media to produce a graphic novel



Lisa Scullion, Peter Dwyer,
Katy Jones, Philip Martin and
Celia Hynes
June 2019

Overview of some key findings

Experiences of trying to find work

- Demoralised by contemporary labour market

I'll never forget it ... the first day I went in to see about signing on, I says, 'Right, I've just come out of the Army, I want to work, what can you do for us?' 'Fill this in'. I was like, 'Oh right, aye, I've got this, I've got this, I've got this'. 'Well, you can't use that.' My driving, my HGV driving, 'You can't use that'... Apparently I had no experience ... I've transported ammunition across war zones and now I haven't got experience [for] transporting chicken!

I suppose at the time I was a bit arrogant, and I thought, oh, I'll get a job. Do you know what I mean? I just thought, pff, all my skills... Then when I started applying for jobs, nothing, not a response, nada, and I suppose after about six months I realised that the way the job market works now is very different from in the past, now what's happening is, all these agencies... I don't really like doing temp work, and I didn't really want to do temp work, but it made me do temp work. So I pitched myself to the agencies as a temp... So every job that I did was kind of like five or six weeks, five or six weeks

Experiences of mandatory support

- Disparity between perception of what support would be offered and the reality of the contemporary benefits system

They didn't even really say anything. You get ten minutes when you're signing on... The Jobcentre didn't help me, the Jobcentre just points you in directions where to go, that's all they do. They don't actually help you with anything... They used to help you a bit more, now they don't

- Interactions perceived to be dominated by a focus on compliance

They've become more monotonous and robotic in what they do... In the past, it was never just about signing or have you looked for X amount of jobs. If you haven't, I'm going to sanction you... In the past, it was you had at least 20 minutes with your adviser to speak about certain things, to get some advice on certain aspects of things and they were more informed about what directions could be available to you as opposed to what directions they've been given as a directive for them to follow

Experiences of mandatory support

- Significant variation in the approaches of Work Coaches

[My Work Coach] said, 'If you don't attend certain meetings...If you're not seen to be active on the thing, then they could stop your Universal Credit'... But he said, 'You haven't got to worry about that yet because I want you to get better before you start doing these things' [Wave A] ...

... I moved on from that Work Coach... I ended up with a [different Work Coach]... there was no empathy, there was no nothing... she was very hard-faced and she couldn't understand why I couldn't go looking for work, because she kept on saying, 'Well, it's not disabling you' [when he divulged his PTSD] ... 'Well, surely to God you know what you signed up for?... This is what I don't understand, you lads all know what you're signing up for' [Wave B]

Experiences of sanctions

- Concerns about proportionality

I had an appointment with them, I phoned them saying that I've got a problem... my brother who died... it's the burial ceremony, you understand?... They said, 'No, don't worry... just call us back'. I phoned them back. They say, no, they have to send it to the decision board to see and then they send me a letter after saying that I have to be sanctioned

It was a genuine mistake but I'd still gone in that day, it's not as though I hadn't turned up or anything. So I rang up straightaway, I explained my situation and like I say it was generally just daft, but it was a mistake, an innocent but stupid mistake, we all make mistakes but I still did turn up and I got a sanction for a week ... Now I'm working [temporarily]... What they do is they pigeonhole it and then when I actually do start claiming again then suddenly they'll make this one week sanction

Effectiveness of sanctions-based system

- Disengagement from the benefits system

Rang them to say I couldn't come in because I was working full time. They said ok . Then I got a letter saying I'd missed my interview and they've taken me off UC. I thought just stuff you. I can't be bothered with them anymore. Mostly I've struggled.

- Counterproductive compliance

My job was solely to prove to that woman [Work Coach] that I had applied for so many jobs, and that was it... Whether they were suitable for me, whatever, it didn't matter

[A] company wanted an HGV driver right I had to apply for that but I don't drive. Now where's the logic there do you know what I mean?...I applied for everything that was there just to prove to them that I'm applying for it. You're never going to get the job

Complexity remains

- Respondents described the complexity of navigating the system, with confusion and misunderstanding typical experiences

Now they've changed it to this Universal Credit, I think it confuses a lot of people... on Jobseeker's you had to claim for Jobseeker's Allowance, and then you had to claim for Housing Benefit, and then you had to claim for Council Tax Benefit, and you get a letter from every single one telling you what you're entitled to and whether you're entitled to anything else, but with this one, because it's all in one, they don't tell you anything

I lost £240 a month because I went onto Universal Credit. It's a lot of money to lose ... I get PIP, then I get ESA, so they're giving me some ESA, and then they give me Universal Credit, so I'm getting it coming from all directions. I get a little bit from each one, and it's really hard to manage... It is confusing. I know that I didn't get any money last week ... I don't know where it's coming from

A benefits system in transition

- Need to recognise the difficulties faced by some in the transition from legacy benefits to Universal Credit

DWP focus group respondent 1: The one thing that is going to be a slight issue potentially is obviously when it comes to 2023, the last thing that will go over is ESA Support Group. Now how many veterans are going to be in that? So we're going to have to keep an eye on that as Armed Forces Champions...

DWP focus group respondent 2: Yes, because there will be issues. It's different for them ... that's what we have to keep an eye out for ...

Thank you

If you have any questions about the project please contact:

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