

Employment support and conditionality for people facing hardship

Key findings from lived experience workshops with Trussell

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Executive summary

Background

This research was commissioned by Trussell to provide them with robust evidence to help them better understand the impact of employment support and conditionality. Through Get Britain Working, the government aims to increase employment and reduce economic inactivity, while proposals in the Pathways to Work Green Paper could extend work-related requirements to some Universal Credit claimants who are currently exempt from conditionality.

These reforms have highlighted the importance of understanding how employment support can help people facing complex barriers to work move towards employment while avoiding financial hardship. They also raise important questions about the role of mandatory requirements, how they are experienced, and the extent to which they support or undermine engagement with employment support.

About the research

This study explored what people facing complex barriers to work need from employment support, what helps them engage with services, and what an appropriate and effective approach to mandatory requirements might look like.

Trussell commissioned IES to undertake this study and contributed to the research design and workshop facilitation. The research drew on a participatory co-design approach involving 33 individuals comprising young people, carers, single parents, disabled people and those with long-term health conditions. Through two rounds of workshops, participants shared their experiences of employment support, conditionality and hardship, and alongside 7 food bank representatives, worked to develop and refine principles for effective employment support and approaches to mandatory requirements.

Key findings

■ **Barriers to engagement and employment are interconnected and cumulative**

Participants reported barriers relating to their individual circumstances and their immediate environment. They also experienced the procedures and structures of employment support provision as creating additional challenges. These frequently interacted, creating a compounding effect that made engagement with employment support and progression into work particularly challenging.

■ **People want to engage with meaningful and effective employment support**

Participants were critical of the mode of delivery and provision rather than the concept of employment support. Participants said they were motivated to work and were keen to engage with employment support. However, current Jobcentre provision was experienced as a means by which compliance was monitored rather than meaningful or effective help to improve skills or find suitable employment.

■ **Trust and relationships are foundational to the provision of effective employment support**

Participants felt that employment support was most effective when it was provided as part of a collaborative, trusting relationship with consistent advisers. However, they reported that fear of sanctions, previous negative experiences, negative perceptions of Jobcentres, frequent adviser changes, and feeling judged reduced trust in DWP systems and personnel. Where trust was absent, people were less likely to disclose barriers, seek help, or engage with support. Participants often framed good support as something delivered through trusted relationships. They made recommendations centred around improving adviser relationships, such as continuity, empathy, coaching skills, flexibility and the need for sufficient time.

■ **Conditionality was experienced as undermining, rather than enabling, employment goals**

Participants frequently described conditionality requirements as inflexible and unrealistic. This was particularly the case when participants were dealing with caring responsibilities, poor health or disabilities. Some felt that significant time and energy was spent demonstrating compliance rather than developing skills, confidence or experiences that could improve their employment outcomes.

■ **Fear of sanctions shapes behaviour even when sanctions are not used**

Participants repeatedly described fear and anxiety about DWP administered sanctions. The experience of sanctions was reported to worsen mental health and increase financial insecurity. The anticipated risk of sanctions deterred some from engaging with social security systems or employment support delivered by Jobcentres and undermined relationships with advisers. Many felt they were penalised for circumstances beyond their control, such as illness, childcare emergencies, fluctuating work schedules or difficulties accessing transport. This contributed to perceptions that the system was unfair and lacked understanding of individual circumstances.

■ **People value sustainable and suitable employment more than a rapid movement into any employment**

Participants consistently challenged a 'work-first' approach¹. They argued that success should be measured by progression into suitable, sustainable employment rather than simply getting people into any job quickly. They viewed unsuitable work as increasing the risk of returning to social security payments and financial hardship.

■ **Participants did not reject a need for accountability, but wanted support prioritised**

Participants were critical of the current application of sanctions and conditionality by the DWP, although some did see an important role for accountability. Participants felt the system would be more effective if barriers were identified and addressed first, and enforcement used only as a last resort after support and reasonable adjustments have been exhausted.

¹ Work-first interventions are designed to promote rapid labour market entry in that those in receipt of social security payments must accept any available job after four weeks (Institute for Employment Studies, 2026).

1 Introduction

This chapter explores the policy and research context for the study. It outlines recent and planned reforms to employment support and social security, including Get Britain Working and proposed changes to Universal Credit (UC) conditionality, alongside evidence on what works in supporting people facing complex barriers to employment. It summarises relevant prior research and sets out the aims, research questions and methodology for the study.

1.1 Employment support reforms

The Labour government's Get Britain Working (GBW) White Paper sets out a programme of reforms to tackle persistent economic inactivity, rising rates of ill-health-related worklessness and young people's disengagement from the labour market, with the ambition to raise the employment rate to 80% (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024). Central to the reforms is the creation of a new Jobs and Careers Service, replacing the current Jobcentre model, merging with the National Careers Service previously overseen by the Department for Education, and bringing together support for finding work, skills development and career progression.

The GBW White Paper also proposed plans for greater integration of employment, skills and health services through place-based delivery models and strengthened local partnerships (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024). Examples of this are the Youth Guarantee Trailblazers, and Economic Inactivity Trailblazers which are currently being piloted and evaluated. These are delivered in Mayoral Strategic Authorities across England and Wales with intent to test locally led and joined-up approaches to employment support to improve life chances and reduce ill-health related inactivity. Plans for devolved employment support are proceeding at pace with the new Prime Minister's plans to give mayors the powers, flexibility and accountability to bring together education, employment, health and local support (Cabinet Office, 2026). These plans are being shaped by a new Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into how best to deliver employment support, evidence submissions closed at the end of August.

Alongside these changes, other reforms include a Youth Guarantee in the form of the Jobs Guarantee and Youth Jobs Grant. These reforms are intended to ensure that all young people have access to employment, education, training and apprenticeship opportunities, and to address growing levels of youth economic inactivity. This is complemented by the introduction of Connect to Work, a supported employment programme designed to help people with health conditions and disabilities move closer to, and into, employment through personalised support (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024), and an expansion of the WorkWell pilots to cover the whole of England.

The ongoing Milburn Review, due to report imminently, reinforces the direction of the GBW reforms. Its interim findings identified a range of factors contributing to the rise in the number of young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), particularly those receiving health and disability social security payments, and highlights the need for systemic reform. The final report will provide recommendations to improve outcomes for young people (Milburn, 2026).

These developments sit alongside wider government efforts to address inequalities in access to work and improve living standards. Our Children, Our Future: Tackling Child Poverty strategy contains measures to reduce child poverty by increasing family incomes, lowering essential living costs, improving access to employment and skills, and strengthening local services for children and families. Taken together, these developments highlight a growing policy emphasis on supporting labour market participation among disadvantaged groups, addressing barriers to employment, and improving living standards through sustainable employment (Cabinet Office, 2025).

1.2 Conditionality in the social security system

Alongside these employment support reforms, the Pathways to Work Green Paper proposes changes to the social security system intended to support the ambitions of Get Britain Working. Following the abolition of the Work Capability Assessment, some Universal Credit (UC) claimants who are currently in the Limited Capability for Work and Work-Related Activity (LCWRA) group would be required to participate in conversations about work and/or work preparation activities. The consultation sought views on how to determine which groups should be subject to different levels of work-related requirements and which should be subject to the Intensive Work Search regime. At the time of writing this is ongoing and no proposals have been implemented. The '[Right to Try](#)', strengthens existing regulations so that undertaking work or volunteering will not, on its own, lead to a reassessment of a benefit award, though it does not fully alleviate the fear of reassessment.

Conditionality within UC is complex, comprising six conditionality groups with different requirements relating to attendance at appointments, work-preparation activities, job search and job entry. Access to employment support is linked to the conditionality group, meaning employment support and social security requirements are often experienced together rather than as separate systems (Table 1). As a result, debates about employment support reform and welfare reform are closely interconnected, particularly where participation in employment support is linked to mandatory work-related requirements.

Table 1: People on Universal Credit by conditionality regime, Great Britain, July 2025

Number of people (millions)	Conditionality regime	Description
4.2	No work requirements	Claimants are not expected to work at present. Health or caring responsibilities prevent claimants from working or preparing for work.
1.5	Searching for work (Intensive Work Search)	Claimants are not working or have very low earnings. Claimants are required to take action to secure work, or more or better paid work.
1.2	Working – no requirements	Household income is above the level at which conditionality applies, so claimants have no conditions.
0.9	Working – with requirements	Claimants are in work, but their earnings are below the level at which conditionality applies, so must meet work-related conditions.
0.4	Preparing for work	Claimants are expected to start work in the future, even with limited capacity to work at present or a child aged 2. Claimants are expected to take reasonable steps to prepare for work, including work focused interviews.
0.1	Planning for work	Claimants are expected to work in the future or are the lead carer of a child aged 1. Claimants are required to attend periodic interviews to plan for their return to work.

Source: Department for Work and Pensions, Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 to 12 February 2026, Stat-Xplore conditionality data (January 2026).

The role of conditionality in shaping experiences of poverty, financial hardship and food insecurity remains an important area of policy debate, particularly in terms of its uneven impacts. For instance, Trussell's research on Hunger in the UK (Bull et al., 2023), cited in their response to Pathways to Work, found that 74% of individuals referred to food banks were disabled, compared with 28% of the wider population. While Trussell (2025) has welcomed the government's focus on personalised employment support, it has also argued that reforms should prioritise support and engagement rather than extending conditionality. Trussell recommended that the Department for Work and Pensions:

- does not proceed with plans to expand conditionality to more than 2 million disabled people receiving UC who are currently exempt from work-related requirements, instead, focus on expanding access to voluntary employment support for this group;
- prioritise building trust with disabled people, including through approaches that allow individuals to take 'safe risks' in trialling work without fearing a loss of income or benefit sanctions; and

- strengthens employer-facing interventions, recognising that reducing the disability employment gap requires employers to create flexible and accessible employment opportunities.

1.3 What works in employment support

What works in employment support is more about getting the mix of interventions and support right in a particular context for individuals rather than one ‘silver bullet’ (Hasluck & Green, 2007). There are, however, some overarching considerations and approaches which have been shown to underpin effective employment support discussed below.

The Department for Work and Pensions is establishing an independent What Works Centre for Local Employment Support (WWCLES), expected to launch in early 2027. The WWCLES will identify, develop, test and evaluate evidence-based locally delivered employment and labour market support to help people access, remain in and thrive in work. A key function of the WWCLES will be to generate, test and scale effective employment support.

Personalisation

Evidence shows that employment support is most effective when it is tailored to individual needs and circumstances (Green & Taylor, 2020). Findings from the JobsPlus evaluation show that employment support conversations need to be person-centred, empathetic, and responsive to individual circumstances (IES, 2026). Flexibility in delivery, including timing and format, fosters trust and improves engagement, particularly for those with fluctuating or complex health conditions.

Adviser relationships

How employment support is delivered is as important as what is delivered, a good relationship between advisers and participants supports participants to share their needs and barriers to think positively about the future (Stafford et al., 2007). Evidence shows that advisers who demonstrate empathy and maintain continuity of contact build stronger relationships and improve outcomes (Ipsos & Institute for Employment Studies, 2023).

Safe and welcoming environments

Support conversations are more effective when delivered in environments where participants feel safe and welcome, including community-based settings. For example, where employment support has been situated in familiar and accessible local settings, often outside of traditional Jobcentre settings, barriers to participation are reduced (Newton & Burrowes, 2017; Centre for Ageing Better, 2019; IES, 2026a).

A gradual and holistic approach

Previous evaluations have found that when the pace and nature of support are co-determined by both adviser and participant, relationships are strengthened, which in turn

promotes positive behavioural changes towards employment and enhances self-efficacy in finding work (IES, 2022). However, it is also clear that addressing barriers to employment is a critical early stage of effective employment support (Green & Taylor, 2020).

Voluntary engagement

IES research highlights that voluntary, person-centred approaches are often more effective than compliance-driven models, particularly for individuals with health conditions or complex barriers (IES, 2026). For instance, the New Deal for Disabled People was effective in encouraging participants (especially longer-term participants) to move off incapacity-related social security payments and led to an increase in their employment, without relying on mandatory participation (Stafford et al., 2007). The Commission on the Future of Employment Support (2024) recommended ending the ‘compliance culture’ in Jobcentres, creating a clearer separation between social security payments administration and employment support, and replacing the Claimant Commitment with forward-looking personalised Action Plans.

Sustainability over rapid entry

The Commission on the Future of Employment Support (2024) also highlighted the need for an employment support system that supports long-term stability, rather than short-term job outcomes. Similarly, The Communities for Work model emphasises the need for ‘sustainable’ employment rather than rapid progression into employment (Newton & Burrowes, 2017). Although this requires more work upfront, taking time to find the ‘right’ job is less likely to lead to a ‘revolving door’ between short-time employment and social security payments.

1.4 Project aims and objectives

In the context of reforms to employment support and UC conditionality, there is a clear need for lived experience evidence to shape how these changes are designed and implemented. This research aims to enable Trussell to influence how the Department for Work and Pensions allocates and delivers employment support funding, and to inform the development of mandatory requirements that reduce hardship, build trust, and support sustainable employment outcomes.

Research questions

1. What features of employment support programmes are relevant and empowering to people who face complex barriers to work and help deliver positive outcomes in moving people into or closer to work?
2. How can employment support effectively and sustainably prevent someone who faces complex barriers to work from facing hardship?

3. What do people facing complex barriers to employment say they need to feel ready to engage with employment support, and how can services respond to these needs effectively to build trust and willingness to engage with support?
4. What is an appropriate and effective approach to implementing mandatory requirements in employment support that drives employment outcomes, avoids driving hardship and maintains public and participant trust?

1.5 Overview of methodology

This research builds on desk research, expert interviews and food bank interviews focusing on employment support and conditionality conducted internally by Trussell. It drew on a participatory, co-design approach to explore experiences of employment support, conditionality and hardship among people with lived experience of the social security system.

The current study involved two stages of online workshops with three groups (33 participants in total): young people (11), carers and single parents (10) and disabled people and those with long-term health conditions (12). The three groups were selected because they are more likely to experience complex barriers to employment and are disproportionately represented among people experiencing financial insecurity and interacting with the social security system. Participants were recruited through Trussell's networks using a purposive sampling approach jointly designed with Trussell to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. The sample included participants from a range of backgrounds and circumstances, including different ages, locations and employment situations, all of whom had experience of interacting with the social security system and employment support.

The first set of workshops explored participants' perspectives on current approaches to employment support and conditionality, and their sense of the barriers to engagement, meeting conditionality requirements and sustaining employment. Throughout, participants were encouraged to discuss any employment support they had received including through third sector organisations, however, they rarely reflected on any support other than provided by Jobcentres. Following the initial workshops, the research team analysed the barriers and clustered them into four themes for further consultation.

The second set of workshops included food bank representatives from Trussell, which enabled frontline delivery perspectives to emerge. The four themes drawn out by the researchers were presented to participants who reviewed and refined the analysis. Participants broadly agreed with the themes, added barriers not raised in the first workshops and contributed examples from their own experiences as illustration. They were keen to note that many people experience more than one barrier at a time and that barriers can exacerbate other issues in a domino effect.

As discussed in the appendices, the second workshops also focused on testing and refining principles for effective employment support and conditionality. Hypothetical scenarios based on situations people experience when working with Jobcentres were used to generate discussions as to 'what works', 'what is counterproductive' and 'what

could be done differently'. Participants' responses to these scenarios were then analysed by the research team and used to generate potential, workable solutions.

The research was conducted in line with participatory, trauma-informed and ethical research principles. Full details of the methodology are provided in the appendix.

2 Findings

2.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together the findings from both sets of workshops. In the initial workshops, participants identified barriers to engaging with employment support, meeting conditionality requirements and sustaining employment. These were then clustered into four key themes:

1. **Individual barriers:** These are barriers experienced on a personal level such as health or caring commitments.
2. **Environmental barriers:** These are external obstacles which stem from a person's immediate surroundings such as their locality, accessibility of transport or the wider context such as the cost of living.
3. **Procedural barriers:** These are challenges caused by how employment support is delivered 'on the ground'.
4. **Structural barriers:** These are system-level issues such as how services are designed and organised.

The chapter provides an explanation of each theme and provides examples of what form barriers take and how they work to prevent or make engagement challenging. In the second set of workshops, participants reflected on these barriers and discussed principles for effective employment support and conditionality. This chapter draws on this data² to map potential changes to current delivery onto the barriers identified by participants. A list of specific suggestions by barrier is provided in the appendices.

2.2 Individual Barriers

Individual barriers raised by participants were commonly discussed as preventing people from engaging with employment support. These experiences were particularly noted as being a barrier to people accessing employment support services at all rather than

² Direct participant quotes are taken from transcripts of the main room discussion, posts in the chat, and submissions on Mentimeter (an interactive digital tool). Where transcripts are not available (for instance in breakout room discussions), participant responses have been paraphrased from facilitator notes.

engaging or continuing to engage. Participant responses to scenarios indicated that the impact of these barriers could be potentially reduced through changes to service delivery.

2.2.1 Identifying individual barriers

- **Health and wellbeing.** Participants, particularly in the health and disability barriers group, discussed how physical health conditions but also mental health and neurodivergent conditions, anxiety and stress could act as barriers to engaging with employment support. Participants provided examples of how interactions with DWP systems could exacerbate existing health conditions. For example, they observed that Jobcentres can be overstimulating in terms of light and noise. They also reported that the stress of trying to meet requirements worsened their mental health and that requirements did not account for them having bad days where they were able to do less than usual. *“I could have a good day or a bad day and [the] Jobcentre has no understanding and just go by what their screen says”* (health and disability barriers group). Participants further noted that physical access could be challenging, particularly when the Jobcentre was located a considerable distance away.
- **Fear, distrust and trauma.** Participants raised a sense of distrust of DWP employment support, which led to a reluctance to engage. The word fear was used by a number of participants. This included fears of being judged, stereotyped, not being understood or mistreated and fear of losing everything. In some cases, this resulted from previous negative experiences of interactions with DWP services but in others, this fear was perceptual. This may relate to the impact of wider discourses around social security payments, unemployment, disability and single parenthood and their potential for stigma³. For example, a participant referred to being *“constantly under scrutiny for the crime of being young and disabled”* (health and disability barriers group). It is also worth noting that fear is not always unfounded. For example, one participant cited a fear of losing her PIP⁴ for working. Although the food bank representative in the workshop pointed out that this was not technically the case, ‘right to try’ regulations⁵ introduced in April 2026 do not entirely protect disabled people from losing their entitlement⁵. Unsurprisingly then, workshop findings indicate negative perceptions of DWP and the ways in which rules are implemented can deter engagement with employment support thereby affecting the financial security of those in a precarious position and entitled to social security.

³ Stigma has been found to have a profound and negative impact on people’s wellbeing and sense of self. Furthermore, it can deter people from seeking support or accessing services, further exacerbating poor outcomes and reinforcing negative stereotypes (Ellis-Sloan 2014).

⁴ Personal Independence Payment (PIP)

⁵ ‘Right to try’ regulations state that starting work or volunteering itself will not trigger an award review. However, DWP retain the ability to use the nature of the employment or volunteering to initiate a review. (Trussell 2026).

- **Confidence, identity and self-belief.** Participants described how periods of long-term unemployment had reduced their self-belief and how, in turn, low confidence reduced their motivation to apply for jobs. For some, a positive and confident sense of self had been eroded by negative experiences with advisers or systems. As one participant from the health barriers workshop noted, *“Confidence is a HUGE thing, especially in the climate we’re in at the moment, it’s so so damaging”* [emphasis in original]. Other participants spoke about being “made” to feel “inadequate” or “inferior” as a result of these interactions. One noted how this led to avoidance behaviours such as “self-sabotage”. These findings highlight ways in which procedural elements of the systems contribute to individual-level barriers that reduce meaningful engagement.
- **Skills and resources.** Participants described barriers relating to digital exclusion, a lack of qualifications, skills or training, CV gaps, time management difficulties and a lack of appropriate work clothing. They noted how these factors could constrain individuals' ability to engage with employment support and their ability to meet associated requirements. A lack of digital skills and/or access could mean that appointments and communications were missed. As a participant from the single parent and carers group noted, *“there is strong emphasis on [the] online account/journal for universal credit and job searching, but this is an assumption that everyone can access online tools and mobile phones the same”*. Participants also highlighted the challenges of living in temporary accommodation or unstable circumstances, where important items can be lost or stolen. Some noted that they wanted to improve their skills and experience, but they felt that support for returning to education was often minimal and there was a perception that taking on volunteering roles was restricted for claimants on certain conditionality regimes.
- **Caring commitments.** Participants also noted that caring commitments could prevent them from complying with requirements which then led to an increased risk of being sanctioned. They felt that caring responsibilities, even when not officially recognised through a carers allowance, should be taken seriously and taken into account when setting requirements. For example, participants in the single parents and carers group noted that appointment times were often scheduled without sufficient consideration of children's pick-up and drop-off needs; *“I have had to rearrange video meetings (which I had to fight to get) because they get booked at school run times”*.

2.2.2 Addressing individual barriers

- **Relationship-based personal support.** Participants felt that the work coach role put undue emphasis on monitoring and checking compliance. They repeatedly called for a relationship built on trust and empathy instead. As one of the food bank representatives noted, building trust and showing care can lead to improved support; *“If someone trusts their adviser, they’re more likely to be honest about barriers like mental health, debt, or childcare. You can’t fix what you don’t know. For example, I think trust is the foundation. If a client thinks you’re just going to sanction them, they’ll hide problems. If they trust you, they’ll tell you they missed an appointment because their kid was sick, and you can actually help”*

- **Addressing barriers through holistic support.** Participants said that employment barriers cannot be separated from wider issues as people cannot fully engage with employment support when they are struggling. They felt, for example, that providing English lessons to someone with language barriers would be more beneficial in the long-term than them job seeking while this barrier existed. Participants felt that employment advisers were well placed to identify where wider support was needed but that they needed sufficient time and the right training to address barriers. They also cited a need for joined up services, signposting, social prescribing and peer group support as advisers may not have all the relevant skills or access. This was particularly, but not solely, in relation to mental health challenges.
- **Better integration of employment support with wider support services.** There were participants who felt more comfortable receiving support through third sector organisations or reported positive experiences with employment and other support provided outside of the Jobcentre. One participant noted that this was because support in this context was delivered without conditionality or sanctions. Furthermore, participants repeatedly argued that their experience of employment support could be improved with stronger links to other services which would support a more holistic approach. Whilst participants stopped short of explicitly calling for community-based employment support, many of the issues they raised and solutions they proposed closely align with a co-located model.
- **A focus on confidence building and empowerment.** Participants said that job seeking was a lengthy process which could often be demotivating and challenging. Many reported low confidence and self-belief. To address these barriers, participants argued that a strength-based approach which focused on positive reinforcement and celebrated small wins was needed. As a participant from the young people group said, (referring to the character in a scenario) advisers need to *“acknowledge and praise every step forward, whether it's updating her CV, attending a workshop, or making a successful networking contact”*. Participants argued this was key in building motivation and confidence and was particularly important for people with complex barriers for whom the end goal of employment might feel a long way off; *“recognise small steps; [for] many people with disabilities, [it] takes them a long time to achieve small steps but it is made to feel like it's never enough”* (Young people group).

2.3 Environmental Barriers

Participants noted external obstacles stemming from individual circumstances or the contexts in which they lived. These generally lay outside individual and employment support provision as they related to factors often beyond the control of either sphere. These barriers prevented engagement in the first place but were also experienced as demotivating and increased a sense of futility about engaging. In this analysis, these are grouped as ‘environmental barriers’. Through their responses to the scenarios, participants identified solutions and ways of working with environmental barriers through a combination of resource-based support and labour market interventions.

2.3.1 Identifying environmental barriers

Poverty-related barriers. Several participants referred to the wider economic environment including the cost-of-living crisis, low wages and rising food costs. They noted that engaging with employment support came second to addressing their “*immediate survival*”⁶. As a participant in the health and disability barriers group noted, being ‘swamped’ in ‘chronic poverty’ leads to “*ill health, stress and a lack of decent food...so many costs to just live even an inch closer to comfort*”. Participants also noted that costs accrued from engaging in employment support. This included costs of travelling to attend meetings, costs of technology as well as costs to purchase and maintain suitable clothing for meetings and interviews. These cost pressures made engaging with employment support more challenging and less impactful. One participant also noted that in some cases, it did not always pay to work. Whilst they did not state that this deterred them from engaging with support, it is possible that when pay does not cover basic essentials, some may conclude that working towards employment is not worth it, particularly if work comes at a cost to caring or health. For instance, another participant reported that, “*I work freelance, and for anything I earn, they take it off our benefits. It’s a real deterrent, and far from a supplementary financial aid*” (health and disability barriers group).

- **Issues with transport and access.** Alongside the costs associated with travelling to Jobcentres, participants raised accessibility issues with transport. For example, for some neurodivergent young people, the heat, noise and crowds of public transport can make journeys stressful and overwhelming. Additionally, public transport timetables did not always align with meeting times. Participants also raised concerns about the time required to travel, particularly for those balancing employment and caring responsibilities or other commitments. Several participants commented that travel distances affected the types of jobs practically accessible to them.
- **Lack of suitable employment opportunities.** Where they had engaged with employment support, participants had found there was a lack of suitable jobs, as well as a mismatch between available jobs and their skills, interests and personal circumstances. For instance, one participant from the single parents and carers group reported that, “*the ideal job to fit circumstances would be a work from home role, but because my previous work experience is in retail, that’s all I’m allowed to look at*”. For some, this made engaging with employment support feel frustrating or ‘pointless’. A food bank representative reflected that low pay was often an issue and increasingly

⁶ Although this might seem counterproductive in that employment support can lead to employment which would, in turn, improve someone’s financial situation, research suggests that immediate financial scarcity and stress leads to ‘tunnelling’ or a reduced cognitive ability to focus on anything outside of the immediate problem (Shafir 2017; van der Veer et al., 2024). In short, when someone is worried about paying bills or feeding their family, it becomes more challenging to engage with longer term goals such as finding employment.

there was limited financial benefit to being in work, especially when work was insecure, or involved commuting long distances. They said this was particularly problematic when jobs had a physical or neurological health impact meaning the pay did not compensate for the mental or physical cost of work. Participants additionally highlighted a lack of flexible, remote or part-time work which was particularly important for those with caring responsibilities and/or health barriers. There was also a perception that discrimination in relation to gender, ethnicity, age or disability created additional barriers for securing and sustaining work. Some felt that employers would consider it a 'risk to employ someone who has needs' and others perceived a need for more 'neurodivergent friendly employers'.

2.3.2 Addressing environmental barriers

- **Reducing the financial costs of engagement.** Participants argued that removing or minimising the financial costs of engagement would improve people's ability to meet job seeking requirements. Suggested approaches included free or subsidised travel, help with the cost of interview clothing, grants to cover returning-to-work costs, and support with childcare expenses⁷.
- **Improving the quality and suitability of jobs.** Participants argued that employment support should focus on helping people access suitable and sustainable employment which pays sufficiently. Suggested approaches included encouraging employers to create more flexible, part-time, remote and hybrid opportunities including job carving⁸ where appropriate. They also felt that employers needed incentives to recruit people facing health, disability or caring-related barriers and to make workplaces and recruitment processes more accessible and inclusive for disabled and neurodivergent jobseekers.
- **Supporting progression into available employment.** Participants felt employment support should help individuals access opportunities that reflected local labour market demand while also aligning with their skills, interests and circumstances. To achieve this, they wanted employment support to offer meaningful and accessible opportunities to gain work experience, volunteering, and training to support movement into jobs.

2.4 Procedural Barriers

Some of the barriers identified by participants were related to how Jobcentre support is delivered in practice. Participants suggested a number of changes which broadly covered

⁷ It is worth reflecting on why these were suggested when JCP does offer some of these means of support. The perception might be a facet of the 'tunnelling' noted above, or a result of low engagement with JCP services. Alternatively, it might be that potential support isn't communicated effectively by job coaches.

⁸ This is the redesign of jobs or roles around the needs of an individual. For example, hiring multiple people to fill one role over different hours or removing certain duties from a role.

service redesign and improved staff capability that they felt could address these procedural barriers.

2.4.1 Identifying procedural barriers

- **Inflexibility of support.** Participants raised that their mental health and neurodivergent conditions, physical impairments, employment and caring responsibilities affected their ability to attend meetings at specific times or in person; *"juggling life around appointments are difficult and overrides finding a job"* (single parents and carers group). They wanted sufficient notice to plan for meetings. Instead, in their experience, meetings were often arranged or cancelled at short notice. In addition, many participants felt it was unfair that they were not afforded the same flexibility as advisers to do this. As a result, participants described missing appointments, disengaging from support, or struggling to meet requirements despite wanting to engage.
- **Poor communication and information.** Participants described difficulties in both accessing and understanding information about their social security claims and conditionality. They found forms complicated, described the language used on forms as confusing and said it felt like requirements changed frequently. This was exacerbated by the key means of communication (electronic journals), which they often struggled to access leading to missed messages. Several participants said that for those without English as their first language, this was even more challenging. It was additionally felt that the use of three-way telephone calls as a translation service increased confusion. Misunderstanding requirements or missing communications could lead to severe consequences, such as sanctions when they were perceived by their work coach as not complying.
- **Lack of continuity.** Participants reported that they did not have consistent advisers or work coaches. Frequent changes meant they had to re-explain their circumstances and repeatedly disclose personal information, which they found frustrating and emotionally draining. As one of the participants in the single parents and carers workshop stated, *"I have different advisers and I have to explain myself, education and work but there is no consistency of work advisers which makes it more stressful"*. It also made it harder to develop productive working relationships or feel understood, and many said they felt judged, patronised, disrespected, disbelieved or spoken down to.
- **Insufficient time and training for work coaches.** Several participants were concerned about the ability of work coaches to provide the right advice given their training and the time available to them. As a participant noted, *"my experience has been that the coaches and advisers are overworked, underpaid and don't have the right training"*. In particular, participants said advisers did not have sufficient knowledge or training in disabilities, neurodivergence or coaching approaches. Participants said they were often given generic or unrealistic advice, as advisers had limited understanding of their individual circumstances. Consequently, they felt that meetings focused on administrative tasks rather than meaningful employment support, which they found demotivating and frustrating.

2.4.2 Addressing procedural barriers

- **A flexible approach to appointments and engagement.** Participants wanted greater flexibility in the timing, location (online or in person) and frequency of meetings to accommodate employment, caring responsibilities and fluctuating health conditions. This included more appointments within school hours, as well as appointments which avoid schools pick-up and drop-off times and outside of traditional work hours. Those with significant health needs wanted fewer appointments.
- **Improved communication transparency and accessibility.** Participants said relatively small changes in communications could improve engagement, like clearer explanations of requirements, advance notice of appointments and access to information about available support and training opportunities, rather than this being 'gate-kept' by advisers. Whilst some felt that online communications (in their current form) were not easily managed or accessed, others suggested that a revised system could be used to build an online repository of helpful materials such as CV templates to help reduce the number of meetings required. Participants also thought it would be helpful to have agendas or meeting plans shared in advance and recommended allowing people to bring someone with them to 'translate' or take notes⁹.
- **Consistency and continuity of support.** Participants said wherever possible, people should have access to a single named work coach throughout their employment support journey. They said this would reduce the need for repeated explanation of their circumstances while enabling stronger working relationships to develop. One noted, *"I would say building trust and providing consistent support are key to helping people find and keep jobs...it creates a much more positive and effective experience"* (health and disability barriers group).
- **Adviser capability.** Participants felt advisers' professional development should extend beyond job seeking regulations and processes, to mental health awareness, understanding of neurodivergent conditions, disability inclusion and labour market knowledge. They stressed the importance of advisers' interpersonal skills, noting they should be trained in coaching skills, motivational approaches and de-escalation techniques. They advocated for lived-experience advisers who would have a better grasp of barriers linked to health, disability and/or job searching. A young person said, *"[it might] cost more in the short term, better trained coaches, more time per person, but it should save money long term through fewer repeat claims and more people actually thriving in work"*.

⁹ According to government guidance, those on Universal Credit can bring someone to support them for jobcentre meetings as long as they use their journal or the Universal Credit helpline to inform DWP in advance and explain why they need support. It might be therefore that these participants were unaware of this right.

- **A staged approach.** Participants advocated for a staged approach to employment support, beginning with building confidence, identifying and addressing barriers and developing action plans that recognised small steps. They suggested that employment support should start with initial conversations to identify individual needs, skills, interests and motivations. Participants felt job searching activities could therefore be more personalised and would be more effective if this foundation was in place. A food bank representative noted, “... *this approach makes sense because it focuses on the person, not just the job. If you deal with real barriers like transport or confidence early, and build strong links with employers, you’re more likely to get people into roles that actually stick*”.

2.5 Structural Barriers

Participants identified structural barriers arising from policy design, organisational structures and culture in employment support provided by the Jobcentre. These appeared to underpin the procedural barriers and require wider policy change rather than service delivery improvements alone.

2.5.1 Identifying structural barriers

- **The work-first approach.** Across all three groups, participants said employment support was focused on securing employment quickly, rather than helping people access work that reflected their interests, needs, skills, circumstances or long-term goals. They felt that this could result in people entering unsuitable employment which they were less likely to sustain over time. A food bank representative pointed out that this could be counterproductive. They provided an example of someone who was being supported by the food bank who had been required to increase their working hours. As her current workplace was unable to offer additional hours, she had to look elsewhere. This resulted in her having to take a job further away, increasing commuting expense and time, thereby making her financially worse off and increasing her time pressures.
- **Inflexible and unrealistic conditionality requirements.** Participants raised concerns about the nature of claimant requirements, which they perceived as unrealistic, inflexible or insufficiently responsive to personal circumstances. As one noted, “*the terms and conditions feel like a job to access universal credit*” (single parents and carers group). They raised concerns about how difficult it was to manage the requirements to demonstrate compliance given health conditions and caring responsibilities. Several also noted that the tasks they were expected to do were unproductive, such as having to spend 35 hours a week job searching with no time to take on development opportunities such as training which might improve the likelihood of employment. Consequently, participants described conditionality as burdensome; “*a lot of energy is taken up trying to ensure you follow the ‘rules’, far less (if any) time to think about/aim towards work*” (health and disability barriers group).
- **The impact of sanctions.** Participants frequently described sanctions as generating fear, stress and financial insecurity. Several felt that sanctions were counterproductive,

causing increased anxiety, worsening mental health and financial hardship which made it more difficult to engage with employment support and job-seeking activity¹⁰. Participants also said that fear of sanctions could discourage people from seeking support and felt the possibility of sanctions reduced trust and confidence in relationships with advisers and made open communication more difficult. The fear of sanctions could also lead to people not claiming the support they are eligible for.

2.5.2 Addressing structural barriers

- **Broader definitions of work-related activity.** Participants argued that expanding what counted as work-related activity would enable them to participate in activities more likely to result in sustainable employment. They suggested this could include volunteering, work experience, supported apprenticeships, accredited training and education. A food bank representative noted that a young person he was supporting who suffered with severe anxiety had secured a supported apprenticeship; *“He would not have coped with a traditional approach, two years later he’s still there, earning decent money and actually skilled up. No cycle back to benefits. The pure job search pressure would’ve had him stacking shelves and quitting after a month”*. In response to the scenarios, participants also suggested that ‘softer’ activities to encourage people *“out of the house, reduce isolation and introduce routine”* (young people group) should be recognised as these contributed to building confidence and work preparedness. Recognising people’s limitations as well as their abilities was also considered to be important; *“there should be more programmes to help people into volunteering, free courses rather than the focus being on work. For me, full time work will likely never be sustainable due to my autism, and they need to understand that I can still contribute to society in meaningful ways despite this”* (young people group).
- **Tailored conditionality and claimant commitments.** While claimant commitments can be tailored in principle, many participants said their commitments reflected a standardised approach which did not adequately account for health conditions, caring responsibilities or personal circumstances. Participants felt that job seeking requirements needed to be more flexible and respond to individual needs rather than ‘one size fits all’. They considered this to require a more thoughtful and discretionary accommodation of caring needs or wellbeing including a more realistic assessment of the time someone working, with caring commitments or a health condition, could devote to job searching activities.
- **Support first with sanctions as a last resort.** All participants were critical of sanctions, but some said they had a role in ensuring accountability and fairness.

¹⁰ These accounts align with a growing body of evidence linking sanctions to increased food insecurity, financial hardship, anxiety and depression. Studies have also questioned whether sanctions consistently improve longer-term employment outcomes (Commission on the Future of Employment Support, 2024)

Participants argued that effective employment support should support participants, with sanctions as a last resort. They said that when claimants were struggling to meet requirements, advisers should first seek to understand barriers and provide support to avoid non-compliance, rather than enforce sanctions. As a participant noted, “*support systems must recognise that unemployed people are not always lazy. Some are directionless, mentally exhausted, or socially isolated. A supportive relationship can help address these issues more effectively than punishment alone*” (young people group).

3 Similarities and differences across participant groups

Across all three groups of participants, there was considerable consistency in experiences and priorities. The dominant message was the desire to move away from a system focused on monitoring, compliance and sanctions towards one that supports progression into meaningful and sustainable employment. Participants consistently expressed a desire to work but described significant barriers in finding the right job suited to their circumstances, skills and long-term wellbeing. As one participant from the health barriers workshop noted, *“I miss working, but also, I made myself ill working for minimum wage through various employments”*. Some themes stood out more strongly in particular groups, however, and this chapter fleshes out these similarities and differences.

3.1 Cross-cutting themes across groups

Across participant groups and barrier types, several recurring themes appeared to underpin participants' experiences of employment support and their preferred solutions.

- **Trust.** Throughout, participants linked trust to engagement. They suggested that when they felt safe, they were more likely to disclose barriers, seek support and remain engaged. Trust was important to many of the proposed solutions, including consistent employment advisers and personalised support. Conversely, the current system (with sanctions) actively reduced trust in the support and personnel.
- **Relationships.** Participants frequently described feeling judged or misunderstood by employment advisers. They said improving relationship quality (in part by ensuring consistency) was linked to trust, disclosure of barriers, confidence building, motivation and engagement. They felt that when they were known and understood by advisers, advisers would be able to provide tailored and more effective guidance and support.
- **Time.** This was often noted as a key constraint for participants and advisers. Participants described difficulties balancing employment support requirements with health conditions, caring responsibilities and employment. They said that finding sustainable employment required more than simply job searching. Instead, it needed to incorporate confidence building, developing skills, and/or employment focused support which was time consuming. However, participants also felt advisers lacked sufficient time to build relationships and provide the personalised support needed to address barriers effectively.
- **Personalisation and flexibility.** Participants were consistently critical of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches. This applied to appointments, communications, conditionality, employment support methods and use of sanctions. They repeatedly called for support

that accounted for individual circumstances and needs as well as skills and aspirations.

3.2 Distinctive themes across groups

There were also a minority of themes which were more likely to be discussed by particular participant groups. However, although these can provide an interesting insight into the perspectives of these specific groups, care should be taken in ascribing their perspectives to their wider population. For instance, although groups were divided on the basis of a specific experience or identity, there were also some crossovers. For example, some of the young people experienced health barriers, and some of the participants in the health barriers workshop were also parents. Individuals were therefore talking from a position of intersectionality, and their perspectives cannot be isolated to one aspect of their experience or identity. Furthermore, the overall sample size reflected the aim of qualitative research to get at the depth and detail of participants' experiences and is not intended to be representative. This is particularly applicable for this section where we are reporting solely on each group and, within each group, some voices were more dominant than others. Lastly, the groups were not asked to reflect on barriers affecting a specific group. Consequently, whilst the perspectives of the different groups may reflect personal experience or what they deem as most pressing, they were not stating that these were issues particular to the group they were recruited into.

3.2.1 Young participants

Participants from the young people's workshop were more likely to recognise the need for support to increase social connection and address feelings of isolation and loneliness. In responding to the scenarios, they suggested that the characters would benefit from employment support approaches which 'got them out of the house' and provided opportunities for socialising such as peer group support, social prescribing, the provision of role models or volunteering. One participant reported how he had received peer support as part of employment support provided by a mental health charity. This had helped him to feel less alone, build his confidence and social skills and led to him taking on some volunteering:

"I found that really helpful because it allowed me to understand that there were other people similar to me in the same situations ... it really made me feel less alone about the struggles I was having with it and that was particularly helpful for me rather than it being a really formal process"

This group were also more likely to raise the need for the scope of employment support to be widened to include more developmental practices such as confidence building, mentoring and coaching. These young people recognised that a need to understand job seekers' existing skills and career aspirations before providing opportunities to train and upskill rather than simply expecting people to take 'any work'. For the young people group, these activities were considered to be valuable work preparation activities which should be recognised as valid uses of time alongside direct job searching.

3.2.2 Participants who were single parents and carers

For single parents and carers, caring responsibilities emerged as the most distinctive theme and was most often discussed as a key barrier to employment.

“I’m currently an unpaid carer for my partner; I am required to be on hand 24/7 as he can’t even get a drink himself. We are applying for PIP but in between I am being pressured to leave him for work which causes stress for both of us and our kids”

As well as caring responsibilities in and of themselves acting as a barrier, participants also pointed out how associated factors such as transport costs, commuting distances, the upfront costs of childcare, a lack of suitable part-time work and challenges of balancing work expectations with care could make finding and retaining employment difficult. In their responses to the scenario (which featured a childcare barrier), these participants proposed a flexible approach to booking appointments, setting requirements and using sanctions which considered the implications on caring responsibilities. They also cited a need for better childcare support (in terms of cost and flexibility) and the potential for retraining to enable carers to access more flexible roles which could accommodate caring responsibilities.

3.2.3 Participants experiencing health and disability barriers

The health and disability barriers group were most likely to raise that there was a need for better understanding and accommodation of health conditions including neurodivergent conditions. Participants felt their conditions were often misunderstood, disbelieved and insufficiently reflected in job search requirements and conditionality. A lack of understanding around the way some conditions can fluctuate was reported as particularly problematic. As one participant noted, *“due to my mental health, I can engage one day, but another day, won’t be unable to engage, become burnt out”*. Participants called for employment advisers to be better trained and informed on the impact of health conditions and for these to be taken into account when defining requirements or applying sanctions. Relatedly, although fear itself was not solely discussed by this group, some participants talked about how a sense of not having their condition being understood or believed led to fear and anxiety.

“[It] causes genuine fear and anxiety when you have to justify that illness or disabilities are constantly worried about being sanctioned.”

“For me, it would be the fear of losing the current benefits. If I went for employment support, then if I did get a job and the job didn’t suit me, I would lose the current amount of benefits you get... If I went for a job for two months [and] it just didn’t work out with me and the employer, or it just wasn’t suitable, I couldn’t travel there every day or even I just couldn’t cope with it because I’ve been out of employment for seven years now. And then the fear of if I went back on benefits, they wouldn’t give me the same amount, they wouldn’t understand, they would keep pushing me and then that would affect my mental health.”

4 Conclusions and recommendations

This research aimed to explore the barriers faced by people seeking to access employment support and to consider what might help them to engage more effectively with services. Drawing on a participatory co-design approach, lived-experience experts and food bank representatives mapped barriers to engagement. Participants identified a range of individual, environmental, procedural and structural barriers. Many of these challenges are already well documented and understood. Nevertheless, by grouping and mapping these barriers across these spheres, this research demonstrates the ways in which they undermine attempts to engage with employment support and attain meaningful, sustained employment. Moreover, this mapping reveals a ‘domino effect’, in that challenges in one sphere can trigger difficulties in others, increasing the risk of disengagement from employment support and hardship.

Participants drew on their first-hand experiences to consider how barriers might be addressed through different approaches to employment support. Using hypothetical scenarios which reflected real-life challenges and conditionality, participants collaborated to consider alternative ways of working. It was clear that participants wanted to engage with support and employment but needed a system that was better at recognising and accommodating their needs. Participants wanted support that built their confidence, addressed practical challenges and helped them progress towards work that was sustainable and appropriate for their needs. They therefore provided a range of suggestions for reform (see appendices).

The research revealed a fundamental tension in the way employment support is currently delivered. While participants accepted that accountability has a role within the system, they felt that current approaches focused too much on compliance. Conditionality could be experienced as diverting their time and energy away from activities that they felt would best improve their employment prospects. Furthermore, an underlying fear of sanctions was reported as damaging to building trusting adviser relationships and service engagement.

While several of the areas highlighted as recommendations for change by participants are being piloted as part of ongoing reforms, this tension is currently insufficiently addressed. For instance, while the Inactivity Trailblazers are testing how to integrate local health services and voluntary sector provision, the approach to conditionality and sanctions is determined nationally. Furthermore, the Work and Pensions Committee’s call to replace the Claimant Commitment with greater personalised action plans has only been partly accepted to date. Approaches to personalisation are first being tested through Jobs and Careers Service pilots to build the evidence base about whether and how best to implement such an approach ([UK Parliament](#), 2025). In addition, the ‘[Right to Try](#)’ which strengthens existing regulations so that undertaking work or volunteering will not, on its own, lead to a reassessment of a benefit award, does not fully alleviate this potential. As

the government seeks to increase labour market participation and extend engagement with employment support, these tensions will need to be resolved.

The findings suggest that how support is delivered and experienced by people is key to consistent and willing engagement in employment support and ultimately employment outcomes. Participants shared how such a system could be designed. They called for a system built on the assumption that people want to work but the knowledge that they face significant challenges in doing so. They highlighted a need for employment support which recognises their reality, supports progression through meaningful, gradual steps and measures success through the acquisition of sustained and suitable employment. Whilst participants did not call explicitly for community-based employment support, many of their proposed solutions indicated that a closer integration between employment support and wider services would be beneficial. Participants' concern about employment support delivered within Jobcentres, as well as their emphasis on wider support needs, suggests they believe that employment support will be most effective when embedded within broader systems of community support rather than delivered as a standalone service.

Participant suggestions for changes to policy and practice in employment support have been brought together into the below recommendations.

4.1 Recommendations for policy and practice

This research has explored the features of employment support programmes that are relevant and empowering to people who face complex barriers to work. This section makes a set of recommendations. Several of these are being tested and trialled as part of a series of pilots and reforms, indicating broad agreement with the current direction of policy from participants.

Designing empowering employment support

Non-engagement is often driven by barriers, distrust, fear and poor service design rather than unwillingness to work. These recommendations could increase engagement among both groups subject to conditionality and those engaging with support voluntarily. Engagement is most likely to increase when employment support is perceived as useful, respectful and responsive to people's circumstances. These approaches align with evidence from voluntary employment programmes such as Individualised Placement Support (IPS) and Trailblazers which rely primarily on the attractiveness and relevance of support rather than mandatory participation. Participants recommended that employment support should:

- 1. Foster trusted and consistent adviser relationships, using a coaching approach.** This requires a shift in the work coach-claimant relationship from monitoring compliance to one based on trust and empathy with a named adviser, matched to claimants' need, across the work journey. This approach would involve coaching and relationship-building skills training for advisers and allow for longer appointments to enable meaningful discussion of issues. A Coaching Academy is currently planned for Work Coaches, and the merger between Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service offers opportunity to build and implement a coaching approach based on support, cooperation and empathy.
- 2. Enable positive engagement through flexibility.** Improvements in physical environments (layout, lighting, noise and ambience) of locations where job support was provided could

increase the likelihood of in-person attendance. Offering people more flexibility with timings and location would also help to overcome barriers to attendance and engagement.

3. **Take a barrier-focused, incremental approach to progress.** A personalised, incremental approach that treats improvements in confidence, skills and readiness for work as important milestones would support a journey towards employment. This would also need to be supported by continuity of adviser support and organisations will need to consider how to evidence and evaluate progress towards work. This is a priority theme for the [Labour Market Evidence Programme](#) aiming to meet current evidence needs among local and regional stakeholders.

Engaging with employment support

Effective engagement approaches, including voluntary approaches, are being tested as a core part of the Trailblazers, Jobs Plus pilot, and through health and work interventions such as Connect to Work. These include engagement in community settings, such as libraries, and engagement through 'trusted' and known Community Champions in Housing Associations, and referrals into employment support by health services. Participants recommended that engagement with employment support would be increased where it was:

4. **Available in the local places and spaces people already go.** Support which is embedded in local communities and delivered alongside wider services such as food banks can improve accessibility and trust. It would also enable trusted third-sector organisations to deliver wider wellbeing, financial or practical support alongside employment support. Such approaches are currently being tested via Jobs Plus and Trailblazers.
5. **A consistent adviser relationship.** This is needed in order to build trust over time, with advisers trained in disability inclusion, neurodivergent conditions, mental health awareness, trauma-informed practice, coaching and de-escalation to best meet people's needs.
6. **Initial engagement** should focus on understanding someone's goals, barriers and support needs before setting work-search expectations.
7. **Improve communications.** Ensuring digital access and improving digital skills needs to sit alongside ensuring that systems work well and people are able to choose a means of communication to suit their needs. This could include jargon-free explanations, advance notice of appointments including the agenda, and accessible alternatives to digital journals and in-person meetings. Consider the use of AI-enabled translation tools to improve translations for ESOL participants.

Preventing hardship

Employment support can unintentionally deepen hardship when participation creates costs, when requirements do not reflect people's circumstances, or when sanctions reduce incomes. Participants described transport, childcare, clothing, digital access and the costs of entering work as barriers that could make engagement harder and increase financial insecurity. To prevent hardship participants recommended that employment support should:

8. **Reduce the direct cost of engagement.** This requires more consistent and more clearly signposted access to practical financial support, such as travel grants, assistance with interview clothing and childcare funding. Meeting people in their own communities would also reduce the direct cost of engagement.
9. **Treat sanctions as a last resort.** Instead, advisers should take a support-first approach, where they work with claimants to understand and address barriers to participation, with sanctions only used after repeated non-compliance. Sanctions should be used after advisers have investigated barriers, offered reasonable adjustments, signposted support and

exhausted alternatives. Safeguards should ensure that enforcement does not drive people into hardship.

Designing effective conditionality

The tension between how to best engage claimants and conditionality is yet to be fully resolved. While the Work and Pensions Committee has called for the replacement of the Claimant Commitment with greater personalised action plans. How to implement any change in the design of conditionality is being tested (for example through Jobs and Careers Service pilots) to build the evidence base about whether and how to implement any change. In addition, the 'Right to Try' which strengthens existing regulations so that undertaking work or volunteering will not, on its own, lead to a reassessment of a benefit award, does not fully alleviate claimants' fear of reassessment. Participants recommended that employment support should:

10. **Claimant commitments should be co-produced, regularly reviewed and adjusted** for health, caring responsibilities, fluctuating capacity, work schedules and local labour market realities. Mandatory requirements should be proportionate, tailored and support-first.
11. **Widen definitions of work-related activity** in the claimant commitment (such as volunteering, work experience, and meaningful training and education (accredited or unaccredited) that aligns to goals). Advisers should monitor progress achieved through activities that build skills, experience, and employability, and recognise steps towards work such as improved wellbeing, confidence, skills, qualifications, work experience, volunteering and readiness for work, alongside employment entry and sustainment.
12. **Measure success as sustainable employment.** Introduce support that helps individuals move into jobs suited to their circumstances, skills and aspirations and reflecting local labour market opportunities. Ensure the system prioritises meaningful, lasting employment outcomes over rapid transitions into work regardless of suitability.
13. To best build trust and separate people's fear of sanctions from engagement with employment support, consideration could be given to clearly **separating employment support** from the overseeing and enforcing of conditionality currently embedded within the administering of social security.

Creating more opportunities

Employment support will be increasingly devolved, with conditionality and social security determined by national government. Several pilots, such as Trailblazers, and WorkWell, are testing how support across health, work and skills can be joined up and delivered across local agencies. Participants recommended that:

14. Organisations delivering employment support should **work in partnership** across sectors to undertake **employer engagement** that creates opportunities and improves access to flexible, part-time, remote, hybrid and accessible roles for people with complex barriers to work.

5 Appendices

5.1 Methodology

Overview

The project drew on a participatory workshop model, using a series of sequential workshops with lived-experience experts and food bank representatives from Trussell to address the research aims. Part 1 explored experiences of employment support and conditionality and identified barriers to engagement, drawing on and extending existing evidence. Part 2 enabled reflection on initial analysis and built on these findings to co-design and test principles for effective employment support and conditionality.

In Part 1, three online workshops were delivered with separate groups of young people aged 18-25; carers and single parents; and disabled people and people with long-term health conditions. Separating groups supported psychological safety and enabled discussion of barriers specific to each population. In Part 2 workshops food bank representatives from Trussell were invited to take part, enabling reflection on emerging findings and the co-design of potential solutions.

Sampling and recruitment

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants with relevant lived experience. IES and Trussell jointly developed the workshop sampling framework to ensure representation across the target groups and to capture a range of experiences and perspectives.

For each workshop, primary eligibility criteria were established to ensure participants had direct experience relevant to the workshop theme. Participants were also required to have recent experience of employment support and/or receipt of social security payments. Individuals who did not meet the primary eligibility criteria were screened out. Participants were intentionally recruited to include groups more likely to face employment barriers and be overrepresented in the social security system. However, many experienced multiple overlapping disadvantages, such as disability, chronic health issues, mental health problems, caregiving duties, single parenthood, and financial difficulties.

Secondary sampling criteria were used to promote diversity within and across workshops. These included age, gender, ethnicity, geographical location, disability status and health conditions. Recruitment aimed to include participants from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as participants from racialised communities and those with a range of physical and mental health conditions. Recruitment was monitored to minimise

over-representation and ensure that discussions reflected a broad range of experiences and perspectives.

Recruitment was led by Trussell through established participation networks and food bank partners. Potential participants completed a short screening questionnaire that collected information on eligibility, accessibility requirements and key demographic characteristics. Responses were reviewed against the sampling framework, and participants were selected to achieve an appropriate balance across the specified criteria. The target was 8 to 10 lived-experience participants per workshop. To account for potential non-attendance, recruitment was over-sampled, with up to 12 participants shortlisted and a further three reserves identified for each workshop. Participants received information about the study, including its purpose, confidentiality arrangements, data protection procedures, and their right to withdraw before providing informed consent and confirming attendance.

Participant characteristics are reported in aggregate across all workshops to protect anonymity given the small size of individual workshop groups. The box below summarises the characteristics of the participants.

Summary of participant characteristics

Total Participants: 33

Target Groups: Young people aged 18-25 (n=11), carers and single parents (n=10), people with long-term health conditions or disabilities (n=12).

Gender: 45% women (n=15), 45% men (n=15), and 9% non-binary participants (n=3)

Ethnicity: 39% identified as being from a racialised or minority ethnic background (n=13)

Geography: Participants were drawn from all four UK nations: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Health and disability: 64% identified as disabled and/or as having a long-term physical or mental health condition (n=21), 61% reported a mental health condition (n=20)

Caring responsibilities: 42% identified as carers and/or single parents (n=14)

Experience of support systems: All participants had experience of employment support and/or receipt of social security payments

Participatory workshop design

Workshops were designed with the support of Trussell and delivered drawing on participatory research and co-design principles. Rather than treating people as respondents, participants were recognised as experts in their own experiences and played an active role in interpreting evidence, identifying priorities, and shaping recommendations.

Activities were designed to maximise engagement and ensure accessibility. These included facilitated discussion, barrier-mapping exercises, fictional scenarios, breakout

group work and the use of an interactive digital tool, Mentimeter. Sessions were delivered online via Zoom and incorporated flexible participation options, including verbal contributions, use of the chat function and anonymous digital activities via Mentimeter.

Workshops were facilitated by IES and Trussell. This included a lead facilitator, co-facilitator, technical support lead and note-taker. The design emphasised accessibility, psychological safety and inclusive participation through structured facilitation, optional activities, multiple methods of engagement, scheduled breaks and check-ins. After taking part in each workshop, participants received a £50 voucher as a thank you for their time.

Workshop design part 1: Interpreting insights and exploring barriers

Aims

Workshop 1 explored participants' perspectives on current approaches to employment support and conditionality. Drawing on lived experience and wider observations, participants reflected on how employment support systems operate in practice and the barriers individuals may encounter when engaging with them.

The workshop had three objectives:

- to interpret key findings from the initial research conducted by Trussell
- elicit participants' perspectives on current approaches to employment support and conditionality at a system level
- identify barriers to engaging with employment support, meeting conditionality requirements and sustaining employment.

Introduction exercise

Participants were provided with slides and an overview of the session prior to the workshop. At the start of the workshop, they were introduced to the facilitators and the aims of the session. Participants were given safeguarding information and session parameters. This worked to ensure that participants anonymity and confidentiality was respected, and they felt safe to participate, take a break or withdraw if they wished. Facilitators also provided participants with definitions of terms we would be using throughout the workshop to ensure consistent use and understanding. Participants were then introduced to Mentimeter through an ice-breaker exercise which also functioned to iron out any challenges with using the technology.

Exploring evidence on employment support and conditionality

The first activity invited participants to respond to findings from Trussell's desk review and wider evidence base. Evidence was grouped under three broad themes:

1. conditionality and sanctions;
2. employment-support activities; and
3. approaches that combine support with mandatory requirements.

Findings were presented in short, accessible summaries and discussed collectively using

Employment support and conditionality

Mentimeter and facilitated discussion. Participants were invited to identify areas where the evidence reflected their understanding of the system, where it appeared incomplete and where they felt alternative interpretations might exist.

Discussion focused on systems and outcomes rather than personal circumstances. Particular attention was given to participants' views on the role of sanctions, the characteristics of effective employment support and the relationship between support, trust, wellbeing and employment outcomes. Evidence from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation review of Work First interventions also informed these discussions.

Participants' reflections helped identify areas of consensus, challenge assumptions within the existing evidence base and highlight issues requiring further exploration in Workshop 2.

Barrier mapping

The second half of the workshop focused on identifying barriers to meaningful engagement with employment support. Participants were invited to reflect on barriers affecting access to support, experiences of employment advisers and Work Coaches, conditionality requirements, sanctions, trust in the system and wider practical constraints. Questions were designed to encourage discussion of systems and experiences rather than individual circumstances, although participants were free to draw on their own experiences where they wished. Responses were captured using Mentimeter.

This activity served both as a data collection exercise and as the first stage of the analytical process. Emerging themes generated in Workshop 1 were refined by researchers and incorporated into the design of Workshop 2.

Workshop design part 2: Co-designing solutions and testing principles

Aims

The research team undertook an initial thematic analysis of Workshop 1 data between workshops, grouping barriers into broader thematic clusters. These themes were treated as provisional and brought back to participants for reflection and refinement.

Workshop 2 built on the findings from Workshop 1 and shifted the focus from identifying barriers to testing solutions and developing principles for effective employment support and conditionality.

The objectives were to:

- review and refine the barrier themes identified through Workshop 1;
- explore how different approaches to employment support and conditionality may affect trust, engagement, hardship and employment outcomes;
- identify the elements of employment support that participants considered most effective and supportive; and

- co-design principles and safeguards that should underpin future approaches to employment support and conditionality.

Participants from Workshop 1 were joined by food bank representatives, bringing together lived experience and frontline delivery perspectives. Workshops were designed to support collaborative discussion while managing potential power imbalances through facilitation and the use of breakout groups where appropriate.

Introduction

The workshop began with introductions, a recap of the key themes emerging from Workshop 1 and an overview of how participant contributions had informed the design of Workshop 2. Facilitators explained that the session would focus on reviewing emerging findings and considering potential approaches to employment support and conditionality.

As in Workshop 1, participants were reminded of the flexible participation options available to them and that they were not expected to share personal experiences. Facilitators revisited confidentiality arrangements, wellbeing support and participants' right to pause, step away from activities or withdraw from the workshop at any stage.

Reviewing and refining barrier themes

The first activity focused on the thematic barrier clusters developed by researchers following Workshop 1. Participants were invited to reflect on whether the themes accurately represented the barriers discussed previously and to identify any omissions, areas of overlap or alternative interpretations. Facilitators encouraged discussion about whether barriers had been grouped appropriately, whether some barriers reflected underlying causes of wider challenges and which barriers felt most significant.

Participants reviewed, amended and refined the barrier clusters. This activity enabled participants to contribute directly to the analytical process and ensured that emerging themes remained grounded in lived experience. The discussion also highlighted areas of consensus and difference across participants and helped refine the framework used during subsequent analysis.

Responding to scenarios

Following a screen break, participants were presented with a series of fictional scenarios developed from findings emerging from Workshop 1. The scenarios reflected common barriers identified during the research and explored how different forms of employment support and conditionality might affect individuals in different circumstances.

Scenarios were designed to be realistic while avoiding reference to any specific participant. They incorporated issues such as caring responsibilities, health conditions, financial hardship, interactions with Universal Credit and difficulties accessing appropriate employment support. Scenarios have been included below.

Participants were asked to consider:

- what changes government could make to help people in similar circumstances find and remain in work;
- what forms of work-search conditionality would be fair and proportionate; and
- what forms of support could help individuals meet requirements while maintaining trust and avoiding financial hardship.

Participants initially discussed the scenarios in smaller groups, supported by a facilitator and note-taker. The food bank representatives were grouped separately. Discussions focused on the implications of different approaches to employment support and conditionality rather than on individual behaviour. Facilitators encouraged participants to consider how policy and service design might influence engagement with support, trust in the system, employment readiness, financial stability and longer-term employment outcomes.

The use of hypothetical scenarios supported participants to think beyond identifying barriers and to consider potential solutions or different ways of working. It also enabled them to discuss potentially sensitive issues at a systems level and reduced pressure to disclose personal experiences. Following small group discussions, participants returned to the main session to share reflections and identify areas of agreement and disagreement across groups. The workshop concluded with a wellbeing check-in, a summary of key themes and an explanation of the next stages of the research.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis drew on participatory processes throughout the project. Consistent with the co-design approach, participants contributed not only to generating data but also to interpreting findings, identifying themes and refining conclusions, helping to ensure that findings remained grounded in lived experience.

Data were collected through facilitated workshop discussions, barrier-mapping activities, Mentimeter feedback, facilitator notes and workshop recordings where consent was provided. Workshop 1 explored experiences of employment support, conditionality and sanctions, alongside barriers to engagement and sustaining employment. The barrier-mapping exercise also acted as an initial stage of analysis, enabling participants to identify connections between challenges and highlight underlying issues.

Researchers analysed workshop discussions, digital outputs and notes using a thematic approach, identifying patterns relating to barriers, trust, readiness to engage, experiences of conditionality, perceptions of fairness and the characteristics of effective support. Themes were compared across participant groups to identify both shared priorities and group-specific issues. In Workshop 2, emerging themes were returned to participants for review and refinement. Participants identified omissions, overlaps and alternative interpretations, helping to validate and strengthen the analysis.

Final analysis integrated evidence from discussions, barrier mapping, theme-refinement exercises and scenario-based activities. Insights from lived-experience participants and food bank representatives were used to test, refine and prioritise findings, informing the participant-led principles and policy recommendations presented in this report. This

approach ensured recommendations were grounded in both lived experience and the practical insights of organisations supporting people experiencing financial hardship.

Ethics and safeguarding

The project was reviewed and approved by the IES Ethics Panel. The review considered the involvement of adults who may have been experiencing financial hardship, health conditions, caring responsibilities or other complex circumstances, alongside the use of online group methods. Appropriate and proportionate measures were embedded throughout the project to support participant wellbeing, safety and autonomy.

Trauma-informed and voluntary participation

The project adopted a trauma-informed approach, drawing on the SAMHSA model and Social Research Association guidance. Recognising that experiences of employment support, conditionality, financial hardship and health-related challenges may involve stress, stigma or loss of control, the research prioritised psychological safety, predictability, choice and empowerment.

Participants received clear, plain-language information about the study, what participation involved, how data would be used, confidentiality and its limits, and their right to withdraw without consequence. Consent was treated as an ongoing process and revisited at the start of each workshop. Participation was voluntary throughout, and participants could choose how they engaged, take breaks, opt out of activities or leave a session at any point without explanation.

Research activities focused on system-level experiences, patterns and fictional scenarios rather than personal histories, avoiding unnecessary personal disclosure and respecting individual boundaries.

Safeguarding and managing distress

Safeguarding considerations were embedded throughout the project design. Facilitators were trained to recognise and respond appropriately to signs of distress and to any disclosures indicating potential risk of harm.

Preventative measures included structured and predictable workshop formats, optional activities, flexible participation options, discussion of fictional scenarios and system-level issues, and separate workshops for different participant groups where appropriate. At the beginning of each workshop, facilitators explained confidentiality arrangements and reminded participants not to share workshop discussions outside the group.

If a participant became distressed, facilitators responded sensitively, offering options to pause, step away, withdraw from activities or leave the session. Participants were able to check in privately via chat or email with facilitators should they need. Any disclosure indicating a serious and immediate risk of harm would have been managed in line with established IES safeguarding procedures, however none occurred. All participants received information about relevant support services following the workshop. With participants' agreement, any additional support could be facilitated through Trussell as the Employment support and conditionality

gatekeeper organisation. Participants were given an anonymous feedback form at the end of the workshops to inform any changes for Workshop 2 or future participatory work.

Privacy, confidentiality and data handling

Recruitment was supported by Trussell, who acted as the gatekeeper organisation. Trussell retained all personal and identifiable information during recruitment, and the research team did not receive participant contact details until informed consent had been obtained. Limited anonymised administrative data were used for sampling purposes only.

Facilitators recorded written notes focused on themes and discussion points rather than verbatim accounts. Participant data was managed under a formal data-sharing agreement, with Trussell acting as data controller and IES as data processor. Workshop data was anonymised or pseudonymised before thematic analysis. Participants could withdraw their data up to the point at which it had been anonymised and incorporated into the analysis, as outlined in the participant information sheet.

5.2 Hypothetical scenario one: Single parent jobseeker

Sarah is a single parent facing significant challenges balancing childcare, financial pressure, and strict Universal Credit requirements while trying to return to work. High childcare costs limited flexible job opportunities, and lack of access to training prevents her from securing suitable employment. These ongoing difficulties are negatively affecting her mental health and overall wellbeing.

Background

- Sarah is a 32-year-old single parent living in Brighton with her five-year-old son, Liam.
- Sarah separated from Liam's father three years ago.
- She previously worked in retail but took time out to look after Liam.

Current situation

- Sarah is actively looking for work now Liam is in school.
- However, she is struggling to find suitable retail jobs that fit around childcare.
- She is receiving Universal Credit (UC) but rising rent, food prices, and energy bills mean she often struggles to cover the essentials.

Barriers to employment

- Childcare is expensive and has long waiting lists.
- Sarah has to pay any childcare costs upfront before reclaiming through UC.

- She can only realistically work during school hours; however, many retail jobs require evening or weekend work.
- Sarah does not have the right qualifications or experience to find alternative employment.

Universal Credit requirements

- Sarah must apply for at least 15 jobs per week.
- She is also expected to be available for up to 25 hours of work a week.
- She is concerned about being sanctioned if unable to attend interviews and has previously been sanctioned after missing an appointment due to her child being ill.
- Sarah has had to rely on food banks following reduced payments.

Employment and training challenges

- There are very few jobs available during school hours.
- Many roles are insecure (e.g. zero-hours contracts).
- Sarah is interested in retraining for office-based work; however, she cannot afford college courses.

Impact on wellbeing

- Sarah is experiencing stress, anxiety, and frustration.
- Financial hardship and strict benefit requirements are major pressures.
- Being a single parent adds to the emotional strain.

5.3 Hypothetical scenario two: Health condition and employment barriers

Aman is a 45-year-old man living in Leeds who faces ongoing challenges due to a long-term health condition, limited digital skills, and financial pressures while claiming Universal Credit. Although he is not currently required to actively seek work, he must still meet certain conditions. His fluctuating health, anxiety, and concerns about financial stability make preparing for employment particularly difficult, impacting his overall wellbeing.

Background

- Aman is 45 years old and lives alone in a one-bedroom rented flat in Leeds.
- He has been claiming Universal Credit since losing his warehouse job two years ago.

- He has a long-term health condition (chronic back pain linked to a spinal issue).
- He also experiences anxiety.

Current situation

- Aman's health condition fluctuates, meaning some days he can function well, while others he struggles to leave the house.
- He has been assessed as having Limited Capability for Work (LCW).
- This means he is not required to actively seek work but must prepare for employment.
- He has been referred to a Connect to Work employment support programme.

Universal Credit requirements

- Aman must attend regular Work Coach meetings.
- He must take part in work preparation activities.
- Aman previously missed an appointment due to severe pain and received a warning about possible sanctions.
- He now feels anxious about missing future appointments.

Barriers to employment

- He has limited digital skills which makes job searching and applications difficult.
- Aman is unable to return to physically demanding work due to his health condition.
- However, he lacks experience to be able to find roles that are less physically demanding .

Financial and employment concerns

- Aman is experiencing financial pressure due to rising living costs.
- He is concerned about how working could affect his social security payments.
- His past experiences with delayed payments have reduced his confidence in taking temporary work.

Impact on wellbeing

- Aman experiences anxiety linked to both his health condition and benefit requirements.
- He worries about sanctions and financial instability.
- He also faces isolation and reduced confidence due to long-term unemployment.

5.4 Hypothetical scenario three: In-work conditionality and unstable employment

Aisha is a 23-year-old living in Wolverhampton who works part-time in retail while claiming Universal Credit to top up her income. Her fluctuating hours, in-work conditionality requirements, and limited access to stable opportunities make it difficult to improve her financial situation or progress into a long-term career. These challenges create ongoing financial instability and stress.

Background

- Aisha is 23 years old and lives in Wolverhampton.
- She left college with a Level 2 qualification in Business Studies but has struggled to secure stable or higher-paid work.
- She currently works part-time as a sales assistant in a retail store.

Current situation

- Aisha relies on Universal Credit to top up her income due to fluctuating hours.
- She sometimes works up to 25 hours, while other weeks she works as few as 8.
- She rents a room in a shared house and depends on UC to cover living costs.

Universal Credit requirements

- As Aisha is below the UC earnings threshold, she is subject to in-work conditionality.
- This means she must attend regular Jobcentre appointments and must actively seek to increase her earnings .

Barriers and challenges

- Aisha experiences difficulty balancing Jobcentre requirements with an unpredictable work schedule.
- She also experiences pressure to be available for work at short notice.
- Aisha had previously been given a sanction when she missed an appointment due to being called into work.
- She struggled financially after her UC was reduced by the sanction and had to borrow money.

Employment and progression challenges

- Aisha would like to move into a more stable career due to lack of experience .

- She finds attending interviews difficult due to her unpredictable schedule.
- Better-paid roles tend to be located in nearby cities such as Birmingham.
- Aisha does not drive and so experiences additional barriers related to transport costs .

Impact on wellbeing

- Aisha finds her financial instability and fluctuating income stressful.
- She experiences anxiety due to the threat of sanctions and job insecurity.
- She is frustrated due to her limited progression opportunities.

5.5 Hypothetical scenario four: Graduate unemployment and conditionality

Daniel is a 31-year-old man living in Nottingham who has been unemployed for 6 months despite holding a degree in Business Studies. Although he has previous experience in administrative roles, he has become disengaged from the labour market over time. His selective approach to job searching, combined with Universal Credit conditionality requirements, has resulted in sanctions and increased scrutiny, impacting his financial stability and engagement with employment support.

Background

- Daniel is 31 years old and has a room in a shared house.
- He holds a degree in Business Studies and has previously worked in junior administrative roles within small companies.
- Daniel has become frustrated with short-term contracts and limited opportunities for career progression and development.

Current situation

- Daniel has been unemployed and claiming Universal Credit (UC) for 6 months.
- He has been assessed as fit for work and placed in the intensive work search group.
- His Universal Credit only covers very basic living costs so he eats very cheap food and does not leave the house much.
- Daniel spends much of his time at home gaming.

Job search behaviour and engagement

- Daniel states that he intends to return to work, but shows limited urgency or commitment.

- He applies for some jobs but is selective and avoids roles he considers below his skill level.
- He is also reluctant to apply for jobs outside administrative or office-based work.
- Daniel completes job search activity but does the minimum possible and sometimes fails to provide detailed evidence of his job search efforts.

Universal Credit requirements

- Daniel has agreed to a Claimant Commitment requiring up to 35 hours per week on job search activities.
- He must apply for a specified number of roles each week and must attend regular Jobcentre appointments.
- Daniel has occasionally missed appointments.

Sanctions and impact

- Daniel has received a sanction after failing to adequately demonstrate his job search activity.
- He experienced a temporary reduction in Universal Credit payments and is now subject to increased scrutiny from Jobcentre staff following the sanction.
- He had to borrow from his housemates to cover his food and bills when his income was reduced and cannot afford to pay them back.

Impact on wellbeing

- Daniel's motivation and engagement with job searching has reduced over time.
- He is frustrated about the limited job roles in his area of interest .
- He feels pressured from ongoing conditionality requirements and monitoring .

5.6 Participant suggestions for improving employment support and conditionality

Addressing individual barriers

- Reduce adviser turnover to enable relationships to develop.
- Increase appointment length to allow sufficient time to discuss barriers and goals.
- Adopt a coaching approach rather than a monitoring approach.
- Use lived-experience advisers alongside employment advisers.
- Match claimants with advisers who have relevant specialist knowledge.
- Increase links to organisations who can provide wider support.

- Provide access to group-based activities, peer support, social prescribing and role models to increase confidence and wellbeing.

Addressing contextual barriers

- Provide free or subsidised bus travel for jobseekers, including costs associated with appointments and interviews.
- Provide grants for interview clothing and workwear.
- Offer financial support with childcare costs.
- Encourage more part-time, flexible, remote and hybrid opportunities.
- Promote job carving approaches to create more suitable roles.
- Ensure digital access.
- Provide support to develop digital skills and assistance with online systems for job applications and digital communications.
- Provide incentives for employers to recruit and retain disadvantaged groups.
- Fund accessible training, reskilling, volunteering and work experience opportunities.

Addressing procedural barriers

- Offer appointments outside standard office hours.
- Increase availability of telephone and video appointments.
- Give greater notice of appointments and cancellations.
- Provide clearer explanations of claimant commitments and requirements.
- Recognise and reward participation and incremental progression towards employment.
- Share appointment purpose and agenda in advance.
- Provide practical CV, application and interview support.
- Allocate a consistent named work coach.
- Increase adviser training on disability, neurodiversity, mental health and labour market opportunities.

Addressing structural barriers

- Tailor claimant commitments to individual circumstances.
- Increase adviser discretion when applying requirements.
- Count training, volunteering, education and skills development as work-related activity.
- Focus on suitable and sustainable employment rather than any job.
- Measure progress through milestones beyond employment outcomes alone.
- Use sanctions only as a last resort.
- Investigate barriers to engagement before imposing sanctions.

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