

Inclusion London evidence to the Select Committee's inquiry into benefit sanctions

December 2016

Information about the inquiry is available at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/benefit-sanctions-16-17/>

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1. Introduction

Inclusion London

1.1 Inclusion London is a London-wide user-led organisation which promotes equality for London's Deaf and Disabled people and provides capacity-building support for over 70 Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations (DDPOs) in London and through these organisations our reach extends to over 70,000 Disabled Londoners.

Disabled people

1.2

- In 2012/13 there were approximately 12.2 million Disabled adults and children in the UK, a rise from 10.8 million in 2002/03. The estimated percentage of the population who were disabled remained relatively constant over time at around 19 per cent.¹
- There are approximately 1.2 million Disabled people living in London.²

¹ Family Resources survey United Kingdom 2012/13:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/325491/family-resources-survey-statistics-2012-2013.pdf (page 61)

²https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/325491/family-resources-survey-statistics-2012-2013.pdf (page 64)

2. Summary of evidence

2.1 Based on the experiences of Deaf and Disabled people we believe that sanctions are destructive; they do not provide an incentive to find work – they do the very opposite – they drive Deaf and Disabled people further away from being able to find employment. This is because sanctions leave Disabled people with very little money to buy food or pay for fuel or rent and the whole claimant commitment system has a huge detrimental impact on Disabled people’s health and wellbeing.

2.2 The National Audit Office report found that sanctions for Disabled people claiming Employment Support Allowance (ESA) reduce the amount of time in work and may discourage some Disabled people from working, also that there was limited evidence regarding the effectiveness of Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) sanctions.³

2.3 Recommendations

- Deaf and Disabled people are no longer sanctioned.
- At a very minimum, sanctions should be suspended until an independent review on the effectiveness of sanctions and the impact of on Deaf and Disabled people’s health and wellbeing is completed.

³ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/benefit-sanctions/>

3. Inclusion London's evidence

3.1 Inclusion London welcomes the opportunity to send evidence to the Public Accounts Select Committee inquiry into benefit sanctions. Our evidence is informed by the experiences of Deaf and Disabled people.

3.2 We recognise that the role of the Public Accounts Committee is to examine whether the cost to the public purse of the sanctions system is worthwhile. However we hope that the 'human cost' to the individual is also considered.

Statistics

3.3 Between October 2012 – when the new Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) regime was introduced – and June 2016, just over 2 million JSA claimants were sanctioned. Between December 2012 and June 2016, around 82,400 Deaf and Disabled people claiming ESA were sanctioned.⁴

JSA sanctions

3.4 The National Audit Office (NAO) report found that 24% of JSA claimants receive a sanction at some point.⁵ However, no information is given on the proportion of Disabled People receiving JSA sanctions. We recommend that this data is compiled, if it is not held already, so the impact of sanctions can be properly monitored.

ESA sanctions – disproportional impact

3.5 People with 'Mental and Behavioural Disorders' are sanctioned more than twice the number of sanctions than any other impairment.⁶ 'Behavioural Disorders' includes people with learning difficulties and autistic people.

3.6 Sanctions can be imposed without considering the impact of a person's impairment. As Paul Morrison, Public Issues Policy Adviser for the Methodist Church, said:

⁴ <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7813>

⁵ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/benefit-sanctions/>

⁶ <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/192084/response/494453/attach/3/FOI%202014%2079%20response%20final.pdf>

"Sanctioning someone with a mental health problem for being late for a meeting is like sanctioning someone with a broken leg for limping. The fact that this system punishes people for the symptoms of their illness is a clear and worrying sign that it is fundamentally flawed,"

3.7 One of the cases we provide below involves an autistic person who was sanctioned for not filling in forms, which were too complicated for him - the system punished him with a sanction.

Research

3.8 Research by Oxford University found that sanctioning appears to be closely linked with rising need for emergency food assistance.⁷ Research led by the University of York found that the effects of welfare sanctions and conditional support were “profoundly negative”⁸ The research revealed that sanctions had ‘severely detrimental impacts financially, materially, emotionally and on health’.

3.9 This research reflects the experiences of Deaf and Disabled people who have contacted us. Disabled people are being put at risk of being evicted and are using food banks due to sanctions. The whole claimant commitment system can destroy confidence and adversely impact Disabled people’s health and wellbeing, as the cases below illustrate.

Disabled people’s experience of sanctions

Case 1

3.10 Below is example which involves , ‘Stephen’ a 21 year old autistic man, who tried to commit suicide after his second sanction, the email was written by his mother:

3.11 We live in South Wales, and jobs here are scarce. My son did not do very well in school, as he struggles with certain things (autistic spectrum).....

⁷ <http://www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/working-papers/the-impact-of-benefit-sanctioning-on-food-insecurity-a-dynamic-cross-area-study-of-food-bank-usage-in-the-uk.html>

⁸ <https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2016/research/welfare-conditional/>

He claimed benefit when he was first out of work, after he left school, but he was sanctioned, for forgetting to attend an interview, and told he could not claim any more money for a period of months, then he claimed again after this time, as he had still not found any work, and was sanctioned again, for a longer period, this time, for not filling out all of the forms he was supposed to, about looking for work. He can read and write just fine, but the forms are very complicated for him, and I feel they are inappropriate..... He felt this sanction as a personal blow, to both his dignity and his right to claim any money at all.

3.12 My son is a good man, he wants to work, he feels guilty that he cannot find a job, and though it pains me to speak of it, he tried to commit suicide, after the blow of being sanctioned a second time. I thank all our lucky stars, that we found him in time, and he is still with us.

3.13 Obviously after this, he could not claim benefits a third time, and none of his family could press him to, under the circumstances, and he tried to do all he could to help me at home instead.

3.14 He is looking for work again now, and has looked into working online as an artist, and tried to get work at a local stables, although neither opportunity came through for him. But recently I was faced with having a reduction in my housing benefit. The housing benefit office told me, that if he was not in receipt of benefit, then they would assume that he was getting money from somewhere, and therefore would assess him as earning £26,000 a year, which would affect my housing benefit greatly, I would get none at all.....I simply cannot afford to live in this house without the housing benefit.

3.15 to return to my son's situation, I have had to persuade him to sign on again. He was not happy to do this, and I was not happy to ask him to, as I know that the interviews are humiliating and abusive, and do nothing at all to help him to get into work.....

.....He has been told, that if he fails to comply with the requirements this time, he will be sanctioned for 3 years..... I do not want him to attend any of the interviews, for fear that this will demoralise him, and put back the months of work I have done, encouraging him to have confidence in himself again.

3.16My family believed in this country, my parents paid into this system, and I have done so too, for many years... and yet, when it comes to my children benefiting from it, as we all presumed... Well it is a disgrace.

3.17 As to the question, value for money? Cost effective? No, it is not

3.18 The 'help' we have experienced is certainly counterproductive to getting people into employment....

3.19 The sanctions had a profoundly destructive impact on 'Stephen' to the extent he tried to commit suicide. This young man wishes to work and is looking for work; the system punished him because he could fill the forms due to his impairment. As Stephen's mother says the sanctions are counterproductive, they pushed Stephen further away from finding a job.

3.20 For some Deaf and Disabled people, like Stephen the sanctions are so stressful they cannot continue to claim benefits and therefore have no income. Not all Disabled people have a family that can provide a home and food.

Case 2

3.21 In this case 'BB's' sanctions had a disastrous impact on his and his partner's health:

3.22) Aug 2013, I had complete left knee replacement... I could not walk or do anything for a long period of time ... my lady.....left her education to look after me (she was from Iran and applied for political asylum as she was raped mentally and psychologically by current Iranian regime...) ... she was without any status and was not entitled to any benefits or income...

3.23) I was awarded Work Related Activities later on that year (2013) which was not enough to live on for both of us, due for being sick and unemployed....

3.24) 13th of March 2014 I was sanctioned (weekly pay out dropped only to £25.00 per week) for not attending job related interview, the letter was supposed to be send to me in Mid February , the day we had flooding as a result of river break its banks I have expressed I never received the letter, but they did not want to know, after 2nd week of sanction, we end up in CAB and the only help we had from Huntingdon CAB office was food vouchers. I did appeal against DWP sanction by letter and expressed, they have created a life threatening situation ...and ask them to reconsider, and twice they rejected me and the appeal turned down.....

3.25) I was forced even with my disabled condition to look for a job as it was no way we could have survived, £25,00 per week was not even enough to pay for heating for the house..... I was accepted and start working as vacuum

cleaner call out engineer, which I end up collapsing after few days of work in doctor surgery, and finally my GP had to write to DWP and explain the situation as my partner committed suicide and I became very ill. Unfortunately it was too late by the time DWP accepted the appeal , my lady had total mental breakdown and she left me and I end up with psychological breakdown (suicidal behaviour) and became very sick.....

3.26) During all these events, my health deteriorated, I have developed lots of health problems, my eye sight changed prescriptions 4 times in less than 6 weeks period, Ulcer, some kind of digestive problem, and total mental breakdowns.'

3.27'BB's mental state deteriorated further after he was served an eviction notice by his landlord.

Case 3

3.28 'Christine' a Disabled person was already in debt and with rent arrears resulting in an eviction notice when she received a letter in November informing she had been sanctioned for missing an appointment in May. It had taken the DWP five months to send this letter. See the email below from Christine written recently:

3.29) "I am on universal credit and am due to get paid on the 17th of November, i got a letter from them last week telling me that i am being sanctioned £10.40 per day for 86 days due to a appointment i missed on the 25th of may.

3.30) I will get nothing until the 17th of January 2017 how can they get away with deciding to sanction me now just before xmas, its taken them 5 and a half months to decide to sanction me.

3.31) I have been so ill with stress and i have put sick notes in to cover me from the 17th of September 16 to the 27th of October 16 and i have one to cover me from the 27th of Oct to the 29th of Dec 16 the sick note is for essential hypertension anxiety and dizziness, i feel like i cant cope anymore, for about a year i was only getting £190 on the 17th of every month which caused me to get in huge debt and rent arrears, now i have been served with a eviction notice saying i have to be out of my council house by 12pm on the 6th of Dec 16 i just dont know what to do anymore.'

3.32 The sanction is likely to push Christine into homelessness. Without a fixed address it is almost impossible to get work. The sanctions are not an incentive for Christine to find work, they push her further away from being in the position to find a job and are 'profoundly negative' as York University's research showed.

3.34 Another example of an eviction notice being served due to sanctions is in 'Nick's' case below:

3.35) My disabled partner who has sciatica, short term memory loss and a stroke whilst having a heart vitral repair back in 2007 chose to retrain, using his disability allowance, to become of Driving Instructor... However the fatigue and migraines he was experiencing slowed him down and he had to cut his working hours. At the end of May this year whilst on a driving lesson he had a migraine and was unable to talk. He got home only to collapse and call for an ambulance where he hospitalised for 2 days.

3.36) On August 24th 2015 he had a severe stroke and was blue lighted to hospital.
He was booked off with a sick note for an initial 2months - from the 24/08/15 to 24/10/15

3.37) The DWP felt he could still return to work. They disregarded medical notes..... They sanctioned his benefits and dragged him off to a work capability assessment. We were without monies to attend to his neurology/cardiology and other medical appointments. We got 2 eviction notices – one 3 days before Christmas when my partner had a lung infection and shingles. I had to get our MP to intervene...

3.38 Following the WCA Nick was found fit for work, while he still had a valid sick note from his GP. This together with the benefit sanctions impacted on his health, as his partner says in her email:

3.39) 'Nick has now regressed in his recovery. His headaches/migraines have escalated.... All this extreme pressure, uncertainty and trauma has been devastating on his overall wellbeing! His bp (blood pressure) has dipped to dangerous levels (71/43) and I've had to call out the paramedics in the early hours. He has had a 72 ECG monitor, Dr appointments...'

3.40) Nicks low bp with one letter (from the DWP), shot up this week to 166/118 with a pulse of 117.

3.41) He is also having to deal and come to terms with his mobility issues, short term memory loss and speech aphasia...

3.42 The stress caused by sanctions together with being found fit for work is having a detrimental impact on Nick's health; the paramedics have had to be called, which all adds to the cost to the public purse, besides the huge stress the Nick is experiencing.

3.43 Disabled people have been experiencing difficulties because of sanctions since 2012, which we have illustrated with just one case below:

Case 4

3.44) 'Of the family with a three week old baby, her father sanctioned this morning for a year. The job centre said he came on the wrong day, he showed them the letter for the day to see them today, the jcp changed it and did not tell him. He cried on my shoulder, his family affected by the bedroom tax, no food, nothing.... So we applied for DHP for him, and for hardship payments, his baby called chole has a few toys for christmas and some clothes and baby milk, some of the shops in the area donated for them.'

Are sanctions effective?

3.45 In our opinion, based on the experiences Disabled people have sent to us sanctions are destructive; they do not provide an incentive to find work – they do the very opposite – they drive Disabled people further away from being able to find employment. This is because sanctions leave Disabled people with very little money to buy food or pay for fuel or rent and the whole claimant commitment system has a huge detrimental impact on Disabled people's health and wellbeing.

Employment Support Allowance

3.46 Disabled people's experiences are reflected in the recent National Audit Office (NAO) report, which found that sanctions for Disabled people claiming ESA:

‘... reduced claimants’ time in employment, particularly part-time employment. Most of the reduction meant people spent more time claiming, suggesting sanctions may have discouraged some claimants from working.’⁹

Jobseekers Allowance

Stop claiming benefits

3.47 The NAO report points out that some people may stop claiming benefits without finding work and may experience hardship as a result.¹⁰ We agree with this, as some Disabled people, like Stephen, stop claiming benefits because the whole process is so demoralising and damaging to their health and wellbeing. Without benefits Disabled people can have little or no money to cover basic bills such as food, rent and fuel.

Lack of evidence

3.48 NAO report said that the DWP ‘has limited evidence’ on the deterrent effect of sanctions, while international evidence suggested that although people who get sanctions are more likely to get work the ‘effect can be short-lived’ i.e. the employment is not sustainable. Regarding studies of sanctions in Great Britain there seems to be no evidence of that they are effective.¹¹

Are sanctions cost effective?

3.49 Sanctions cause Disabled people’s health and wellbeing to deteriorate as the cases studies above illustrate. The demand on health services inevitably rises as a result as well as the increased call on local welfare support, this results in an increase in public spending as the NAO report highlighted.¹² Also the DWP ‘does not track these wider costs’, which need to be taken into account when evaluating whether sanctions are cost effective.

⁹ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/benefit-sanctions/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/benefit-sanctions/>

¹¹ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/benefit-sanctions/>

¹² <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/benefit-sanctions/>

3.50 The DWP estimated it spent ‘over £240 million a year administering conditions and sanctions’.¹³ Considering there is a lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of JSA sanctions and the NAO evidence showed that ESA sanctions shorten the time in employment,¹⁴ we believe the sanctions system is not cost effective.

Negative impact on health and wellbeing

3.51 The cases studies we have provided illustrate only too well the damaging impact of the sanctions system on health and wellbeing. Also the British Psychological Society, the UK Council for Psychotherapy, and three other organisations have signed a statement saying:

3.52) ‘Not only are we concerned that the sanctions process is undermining mental health and wellbeing – there is no clear evidence of pay-off in terms of increased employment and no commitment from the Government to investigate how the jobcentre systems and requirements may themselves be exacerbating mental health problems. We continue to call on the Government to address these concerns and suspend the use of sanctions subject to the outcomes of an independent review.’¹⁵

3.53 We believe that the government should stop sanctioning Deaf and Disabled people. There is little or no evidence that sanctions are effective. To continue with this pointless, punitive system, which has such a destructive impact on Disabled people would be wrong.

3.54 Recommendation

Deaf and Disabled people are no longer sanctioned.

At very minimum sanctions should be suspended until an independent review on the effectiveness of sanctions and the impact of on Deaf and Disabled people’s health and wellbeing is completed.

¹³ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/benefit-sanctions/>

¹⁴ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/benefit-sanctions/>

¹⁵ <http://beta.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/british-psychological-society-signs-statement-opposing-welfare-sanctions>

That concludes this evidence.

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