

Reimagining employment support

How to ensure seamless
support for young people
who are NEET



**citizens
advice**

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Executive summary

The government is right to [acknowledge](#) the increasing numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). However, the system isn't well set up to help young people with the challenges they face.

Employment support must be reformed if the government is serious about helping more young people into work. At the moment, work coaches don't have enough time to explore young people's unique circumstances or offer meaningful employment advice. Barriers to work, including issues with debt, housing and benefits, are often left unaddressed. Instead, work coaches focus on compliance with rules.

Too often this leaves young people feeling unsupported and disempowered. They want to get into work, but are facing seemingly insurmountable hurdles.

While the introduction of Youth Hubs is a welcome step, the support they offer is limited to 6 months. In addition, they often lack the integration with other local services needed to ensure that young people don't fall between the cracks.

We propose three key steps needed for meaningful change:

1. **Reimagine the Jobcentre structure to provide more holistic, tailored support.** Split the work coach role into two: case workers and careers advisers, to better target support. Bring benefit advice in-house to help young people tackle the practical and financial barriers they face to work.
2. **Change conditionality to better reflect workplace practices and encourage positive working relationships.** Introduce a mutual 'support plan', tailored to the individual. Where a young person refuses to engage, apply a Performance Improvement Plan before sanctions are considered.
3. **Move to a hub and spoke model, connecting employment support to other local services as part of local Get Britain Working plans.** Jobcentres should work with Youth Hubs, the local authority and other co-located services to offer joined-up, proactive support to young people. Co-located services must be accessible, prioritise warm handovers through direct referrals and put data sharing agreements in place.

These reforms would not require significant costs, but would help tackle many of the barriers young people face to engaging with support services.

Introduction

Young people need the right support to be able to make the jump into work. But, as the [Young People and Work interim report](#) commissioned by the government makes clear, they're facing a system that isn't well set up for the challenges they face. High rates of child poverty, worsening mental health, a lack of early intervention and treatment options, insufficient skills training and employment support and a reduction in the number of entry level roles, are all part of the complex picture.

With increasing numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), it's welcome that the government is taking this issue seriously.

At Citizens Advice, we help about 280 young people per day with issues including benefits, debt and employment. We see how young people can struggle to manage their complex life circumstances, navigate the benefits system and succeed in work. As part of this, our advisers consistently highlight one area where young people are being let down: in their interactions with the Jobcentre.

Young people using the Jobcentre are often let down by a system that's not designed to help them overcome barriers to work, develop the skills they need, or build their confidence in developing a career plan.

Our frontline insights highlight that there is no typical NEET young person. Some young people are searching desperately for work, but aren't receiving the support they need. Some young people are dealing with financial hardship and debt that make it difficult for them to consider work. Some young people have health conditions that make work possible under only very limited circumstances. In all of these instances, the Jobcentre could do a much better job at meeting the young person where they are, and providing a springboard to help them move forward.

The government has already recognised this issue and taken welcome action by introducing Youth Hubs. These locally organised hubs allow young people to access tailored employment, skills and training guidance under the same roof as vital wrap-around services, which can include health, housing and wellbeing support. This is an exciting development and reflects many of the improvements we think would be valuable in Jobcentres more widely: tailored support, longer

appointments, and case worker relationships separated out from sanctioning decisions.

However, at present Youth Hubs are not the main way young people interact with employment support. Most young people come to Youth Hubs via the Jobcentre, and support is usually limited to 6 months. Moreover, Youth Hubs often lack integration with other co-located services. As a result, they're not currently meeting their full potential.

The government is expanding the number of Youth Hubs nationally and may in time consider having Youth Hubs as the main front door for young jobseekers. If so, it's crucial that Youth Hubs are better integrated into the local community of support and that the flaws in the current Jobcentre model aren't inadvertently replicated as caseloads increase.

As such, if the government is serious about reshaping the welfare state to better support young people, going further in reforming employment support must be a priority. This should involve a rethink of the system as a whole: reimagining how people engage with the Jobcentre, introducing a new model of conditionality and better aligning Youth Hubs with support in the community.

We recognise that this is only one small piece of the NEET puzzle. For example, there will be some young people who are completely unable to work or engage with employment support. This may be due to temporary crises, caring responsibilities, illness or disability. This report doesn't go into how these young people should be identified or supported. However, it's crucial that the welfare system provides a sufficient safety net for both those who can, and can't, work. This means championing benefits that promote people's independence, such as [Personal Independence Payment](#), [Access to Work](#) and the Flexible Support Fund. It also means adequately funding benefits, such as Universal Credit (UC), that help get people back on their feet and out of crises. All of these benefits also complement efforts to improve employment support by helping to ensure that people are able to consider work.

Methodology

Findings in this report draw on new and existing research, the methodologies of which are outlined below.

New research

The Cost of Living Tracker - survey conducted by Walnut (part of Accenture Song), on our behalf, between 9th and 22nd March 2026. We surveyed a representative sample of 5,559 people, of which 1,002 were between the ages of 18-29. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (18+).

Survey of young people - our Help to Claim service surveyed a representative sample of 2,012 people aged 18-24 about their advice needs, their experience of claiming UC and their experience of the Jobcentre. Participants were from England, Wales and Scotland and the survey was conducted by Yonder between 24th February to 9th March, 2026.

In-depth interviews with young people - our Help to Claim service interviewed 42 young people aged 18-24, from England or Wales, who had previously applied for UC. These interviews were conducted by Spark Insights in April 2026.

Citizens Advice debt data - we compared the budgets of people who came to us for help with debt advice, looking at young people aged 16-24 who were NEET, other 16-24 year olds, and those who were 25 and over but not in work.

Citizens Advice adviser insights - we reviewed evidence notes submitted by our local advisers about the young people who come to us for help and analysed our internal casenotes and client trend data. This allowed us to identify case studies.

Previous research: Found Anything Yet? (January 2025)

In our previous report, we examined the relationships between work coaches and UC claimants.

The research was based on 25 qualitative interviews with UC claimants (15) and Citizens Advice advisers (10). We recruited claimants through fliers and posters distributed at our local Citizens Advice offices. In addition to the interviews, we also reviewed over 700 relevant evidence notes produced by our local advisers between 1st January 2023 and 30th September 2024.

We surveyed our advisers through our network panel survey (NPS) in October and November 2024. The NPS is a monthly questionnaire disseminated to staff in our local offices across England and Wales. We also visited 2 Jobcentres in different parts of England. During these visits, we were able to observe first identification appointments, claimant commitment appointments, and work-focused interviews. We also spoke informally with work coaches, team leaders and senior staff.

A note on case studies

In this report, we have told the stories of 4 young people helped by Citizens Advice. Abi, Max and Sam's stories use a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

What's going wrong in Jobcentres?

Young people in receipt of UC are typically expected to attend the Jobcentre and meet with a work coach on a regular basis. Those who are assessed to be unable to work, or prepare for work, due to their disability or health condition may request meetings, but are not required to do so.

The government [has indicated](#) that they would like to expand the requirements for young people in receipt of benefits, including those with disabilities, to engage with the Jobcentre. They've also said that they want young people who aren't in receipt of benefits to be able to [access support](#). As part of this, Youth Hubs will be [rolled out](#) across the country.

However, Jobcentres are still currently the front door for unemployed young people. And, while offering more employment support is positive, in reality they're not currently set up to help young people thrive. As Youth Hubs' caseloads expand, they may face similar challenges.

The challenges

Work coaches in Jobcentres have large workloads. They have limited time to engage with young jobseekers and address the unique barriers to work they experience. This is exacerbated by a lack of staff, as the DWP faces [challenges with recruitment and retention](#).

Through our survey and in-depth interviews with young people aged 18-24, we found that while some young people had a positive experience with the Jobcentre, many described feeling judged, unsupported and not listened to. The physical environment of the Jobcentre was criticised as being intimidating and lacking privacy. Disabled participants told us that they weren't always given the adjustments they needed.

In this environment, the barriers to work that young people face are often left unaddressed and, in some cases, they're pushed further from work.

Figure 1: Direct quotes from the young people we surveyed about their experiences of the Jobcentre



Source: Survey of young people aged 18-24 (2026)

Figure 1 shows the mix of experiences that young people have when accessing the Jobcentre. This chimes with our wider [research](#) on employment support. Many young people find their work coach to be helpful and supportive. However, this is too often not the case. We found that the current system focuses on compliance with benefit conditions above delivering high-quality employment support. Too often this leaves claimants feeling unsupported and disempowered.

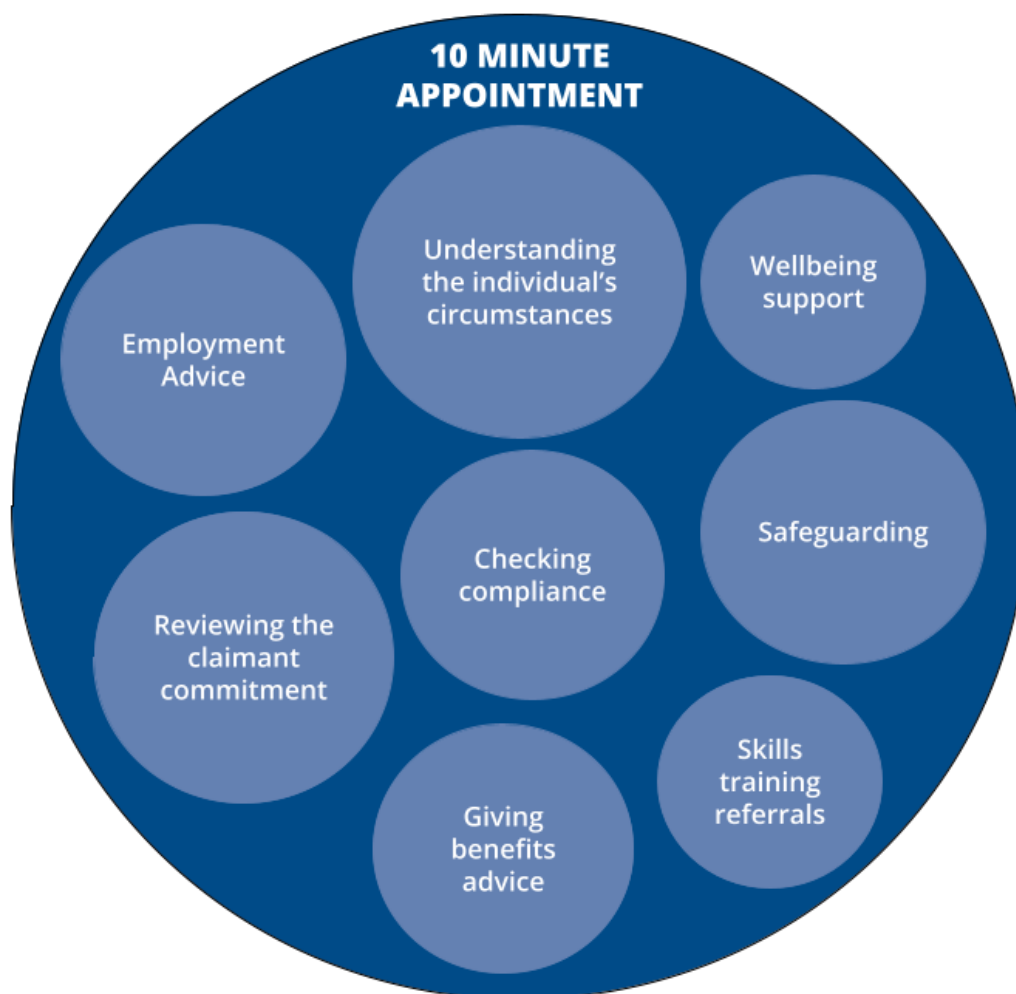
Key issues with the current Jobcentre model:

- **Lack of time:** high workloads and 10 minute appointments mean work coaches struggle to provide effective employment support.
- **Focus on compliance:** meetings feel like a 'tick box' exercise.
- **Unequal power dynamic:** the threat of sanctions undermines claimants' trust in work coaches.
- **Poor attitudes:** some work coaches are seen as rude or demeaning.
- **Poor environment:** Jobcentres are seen as 'depressing' and 'stressful'.
- **Lack of accommodations:** work coaches don't always offer flexibility and understanding of claimants' needs.
- **Lack of staff:** high workloads and lack of career progression lead to a shortage of work coaches and little continuity for claimants.

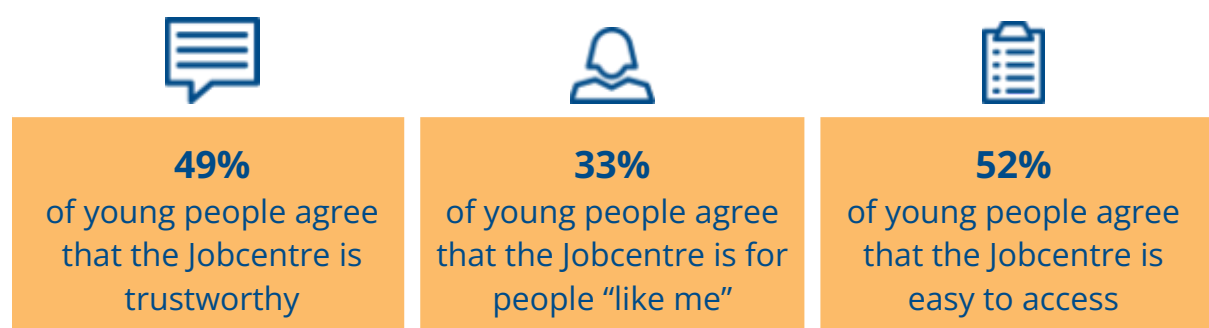
One further, exacerbating issue is that young people often need help with other life and benefits issues, not just employment support. However, appointments are typically only 10 minutes long. Currently, work coaches spend a significant amount of time in appointments fielding claimants' questions about their benefits claims. However, work coaches often lack the time and training to sufficiently answer questions and resolve issues. As a result, young people may struggle to address problems that are blocking them from considering work.

Sanctions are also a central issue for young people claiming UC. The threat of sanctions can undermine trust between young people and their work coaches. Fear of sanctions can motivate young people into accepting jobs that are precarious or poorly paid which can lead to a cycle of low wage, insecure work. The DWP's own [research](#) found that "a sanction leads the average claimant to exit less quickly into PAYE earnings and to earn less upon exiting." Sanctions can also cause financial hardship, debt and extreme stress. 39% of people who came to our local offices for help with sanctions in 2025 also required a foodbank referral.

Figure 2: The tasks work coaches often spend time on during the 10 minute appointment

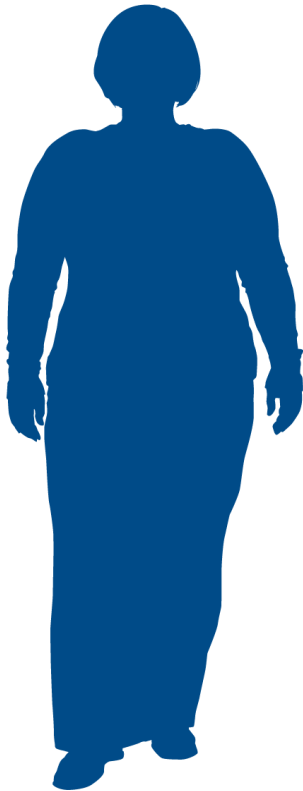


These issues all create a reputational problem. Our survey of young people found that many have negative views of the Jobcentre, even if they've never applied for UC.



These negative perceptions can make the relationship between a young person and employment support even more difficult. At present, young people often don't believe that the Jobcentre wants to help them. This must change.

Young people need good employment support to help them find and stay in high quality work. They also need help addressing the barriers they face to working. Jobcentres should feel like a helpful and accessible place for young people to receive this support. To achieve this, there needs to be a fundamental rethink of the Jobcentre model.



Abi is 24 years old and struggles with literacy. However, she told us that this was never explored by her work coach and she felt too ashamed to bring it up. As a result, she hasn't been given the support she needs to fill out forms or apply for jobs.

While unemployed, Abi has built up a significant amount of debt. She wants to work in a people-focused role, but feels like she isn't getting the support she needs to be able to find a job.

Max is 20 years old. He came to us after he was made redundant and started building up debt.

While our advisers were helping him manage his debts, he began claiming UC and started a 3 month unpaid work placement arranged by his work coach. However, he was then sanctioned for missing an appointment with his work coach, even though he let them know he wouldn't be able to attend as this clashed with his work placement.

As a result, Max was no longer able to pay off his debts.

Our advisers advised him to challenge the sanction, helped him take out a hardship loan and complete a debt assessment, talked to the creditors he owed money to and successfully applied for a Debt Relief Order to deal with his debts. They also secured him a £30 clothing voucher.



A new model for employment support

The government has proposed and launched a number of schemes and measures for supporting young people into work. These include the [Jobs Guarantee](#), [Jobs Grant](#) and [Youth Hubs](#). However, support is currently patchy across the country, is often dependent on being in the intensive work search group of UC system, and doesn't always address the unique barriers faced by disabled young people. This means that many young people are missing out on vital support.

Our vision for employment support is a system where help is easy to identify, access and engage with. It should be available to all young people, even if they aren't in receipt of benefits. And it should be co-ordinated as part of devolved Get Britain working plans, alongside local organisations in a community of support. The goal of reforms should be to remove as many barriers to engagement as possible.

One key part of this is the Jobcentre. As the current front door to support, Jobcentres should be a place where young people feel welcome and supported. They should receive tailored support that effectively helps them plan and start meaningful work. Attending the Jobcentre should never just be a 'tick box' exercise and sanctions should be a last resort.

However, employment support also needs to go further, making the most of the devolution drive by connecting Youth Hubs with other local organisations and services to better reach disengaged young people.

To achieve this, we propose three key steps needed for meaningful change:

1. Reimagining the Jobcentre structure to provide more holistic, tailored support
2. Changing conditionality to better reflect workplace practices and encourage positive working relationships
3. Moving to a hub and spoke model, optimising Youth Hub support in the local community to reach otherwise disengaged young people

The case for case workers

One of our key proposals is to introduce a new role: the case worker. This would overhaul the work coach role by splitting it into two separate positions. The case worker would be the primary point of contact for young people, providing ongoing pastoral and practical support, and making referrals for more specialist support. The second role, the careers adviser, would be a specialist in employment support, meeting young people when they need in-depth job coaching. Investing in these reforms offers some modest operational cost savings in the medium to long-term, as training case workers would be cheaper and more efficient than work coaches.

We also propose introducing a benefits adviser, bringing in-house some of the support that the DWP currently only offers over the phone. This role could also be partially fulfilled by an external advice organisation, such as Citizens Advice, co-located in the Jobcentre. By bringing benefits advisers into Jobcentres, training in benefits administration for work coaches would be reduced, calls to DWP support lines would decrease and costly benefits issues could be resolved before they escalate.

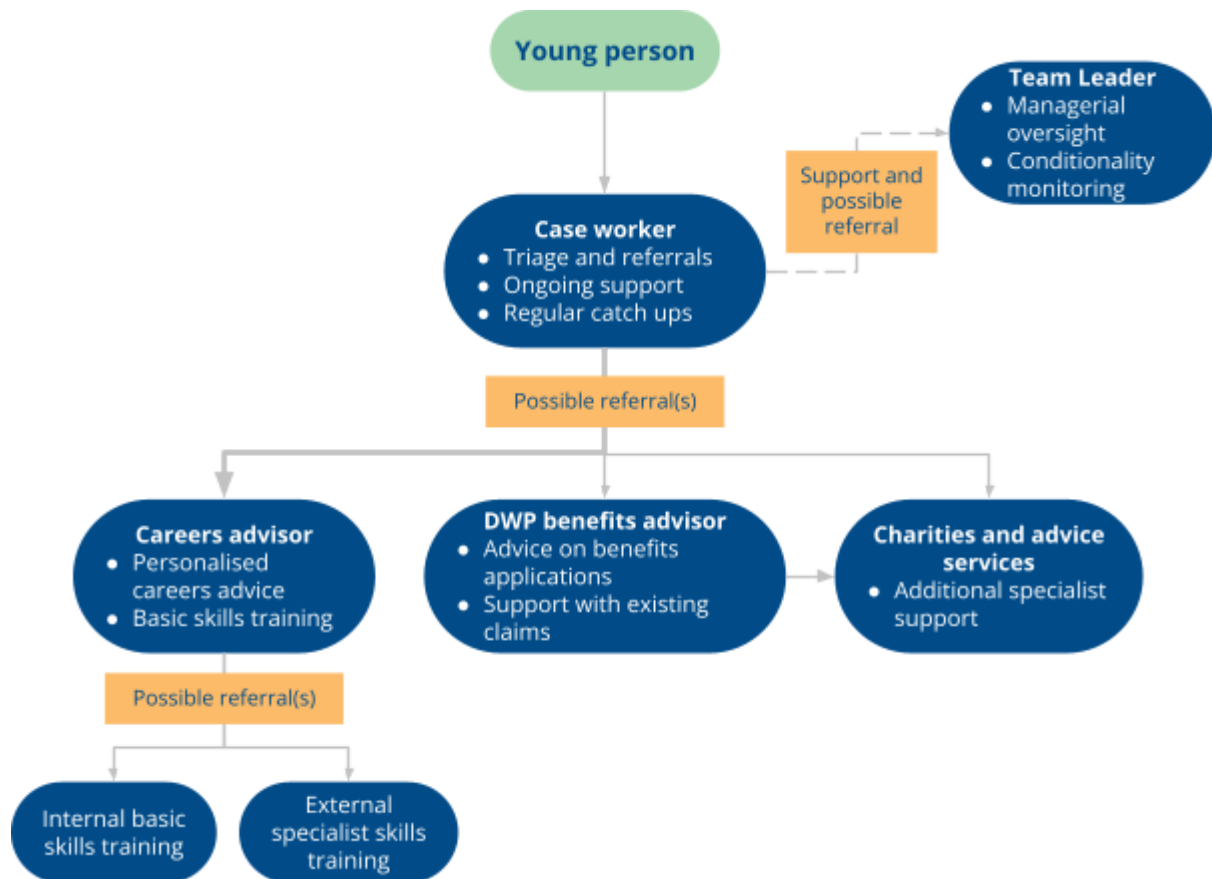
Jobcentres are currently [struggling to recruit and retain staff](#). Our proposals offer an improved service with new opportunities for staff development and career progression. There's also scope to create a more positive working environment with greater job satisfaction. These improvements are likely to reduce staff turnover which would reduce recruitment costs and improve efficiency.

We have [previously argued](#) for the introduction of the case worker model in Jobcentres. In this chapter, we explain the model and show how it can be adapted to support young people specifically.

While these recommendations are primarily about improving support in Jobcentres, they could also be applied in Youth Hubs. At the moment, low caseloads mean that work coaches in Youth Hubs are able to have longer appointments with young people and spend time building positive relationships and tailoring support to the young people they support. If Youth Hubs become the front door for employment support for young people, the case worker

model should be considered to ensure that the benefits of Youth Hubs are not lost due to increased caseloads.

Figure 3: Flow chart showing young people's support path



Case workers

- Primary point of contact for young people
- Has regular check-ins with benefits claimants
- Provides ongoing pastoral and practical support
- Refers service users for more specialist support

The Jobcentre should introduce the role of a case worker. They would be responsible for providing the pastoral and practical support that is currently provided by work coaches. They would be the first point of contact for anyone using the Jobcentre, offering a triage service and ongoing support.

They would assess the young person's needs, offer light-touch employment support and refer them for more specialist support, as appropriate. However, they would no longer be responsible for in-depth employment support, sanctions, or benefits advice. These tasks would be delegated to [careers advisers](#), [team leaders](#) and [benefits advisers](#), respectively.¹

The case worker role has several benefits:

1. Improved relationship building

Having a member of staff as a dedicated point of contact is crucial for building a trusting relationship with a young person.

In interviews with young people earlier this year, we found that participants who had had access to a dedicated case worker, whether through Citizens Advice or local schemes, rated the experience as overwhelmingly positive. Structured, predictable appointments with a known case worker helped reduce anxiety and build trust.

Many people find it difficult having to repeat personal information to multiple work coaches and DWP staff members. In our model, they would explain their circumstances and needs to their case worker in order to access support. The case worker can then, with the young person's permission, pass on relevant information in any referrals so it's not necessary for the young person to repeat what they have already shared.

The case worker would have primary responsibility for safeguarding and checking on wellbeing. They would also monitor benefits claimants' efforts to engage with the system in a light-touch way, but wouldn't refer people for sanctions.

The relationship between the young person and case worker would be sustained throughout their engagement with the Jobcentre. Only in exceptional circumstances, such as a member of staff leaving their role or at the young person's request, should they be allocated a different case worker.

2. Less friction accessing support

¹ This role builds on the 'welcome and triage' position proposed in Demos' report [Open Door Policy](#) (see p.44). Particular thanks to Andrew Phillips for our conversations developing this aspect of the proposal.

The case worker would act as an ongoing gateway to services. They could refer the young person to a careers adviser for employment support or a benefits adviser for financial and benefits advice.

They would also be responsible for informing them about other available support, such as the Flexible Support Fund or the Access to Work scheme.

Our advisers tell us that some people struggle to contact advice services, even when signposted to them. For young people who are dealing with complex life situations, having someone who can directly refer them to the help they need is crucial.

3. Reduced workload for staff

This model should mean that case workers face less intensive workloads than work coaches do currently. Unlike [the current system](#), where young people are generally expected to have a 10 minute meeting with their work coach every week for the first 13 weeks, case workers would be given the discretion to adapt the frequency and channel of contact with young people to their individual circumstances. For example, case workers could offer 30 minute appointments every 3 weeks, using the same amount of time overall in a more effective way.

Someone receiving intensive employment support might focus their time on appointments with their careers adviser and check in with their case worker less frequently. However, someone who's seeking work but doesn't need sustained employment support would have capacity for more frequent meetings with their case worker. Their case worker would monitor progress and any changes to their support needs. These young people would benefit most from case workers' light-touch employment support.

Young people who don't claim benefits would be offered meetings with their case worker as they



wish but with no particular requirements, as their engagement would be voluntary.

As a result, case workers should have greater discretion to organise their schedule and have opportunities to access flexible working arrangements where appropriate. This approach is likely to create a more positive working environment with greater job satisfaction. This is likely to reduce staff turnover, which would reduce recruitment costs and improve efficiency.

Careers adviser

- Specialist in employment support
- Meet young people when they need in-depth job coaching
- Refer young people for training, further education and job fairs

The Jobcentre should also introduce the role of a careers adviser. They would provide employment support to people, regardless of whether or not they're in receipt of benefits. They would help to identify jobs, discuss training needs, provide support and feedback on CVs, and discuss career goals. They could also offer mock interviews and one-to-one application support. This role would benefit from the planned merging of Jobcentre Plus with the National Careers Service (NCS), as they can use the information, training and tools from the NCS to provide advice and support.

Specialist careers advisers would work with young people to provide expert early career advice, helping young people identify their goals, alongside the skills and work experience they need to achieve them. They would be trained to build relationships with young people who have had a difficult time in school or college, or who are dealing with mental health issues.

Careers advisers would be responsible for referring young people for training, further education and job fairs. They would have a detailed knowledge of the training available, both internally and externally, as well as the local employment market. Careers advisers could also specialise in particular professions, particularly in areas where there are regional and local industrial specialisms.

We support the government's [plans to introduce recruitment consultations](#), who will work with businesses to fill vacancies. Careers advisers would be complementary to this role, as they would be customer facing where recruitment consultants are predominantly business facing. Careers advisers could work closely with recruitment consultants to understand the local labour market and identify suitable vacancies.

The development of careers advisers can be supported by the Government's [Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026](#) and wider Get Britain Working agenda. The Act makes Strategic Authorities the default accountable actor for regional employment and skills development.² As such, Strategic Authorities are now responsible for the development of local Get Britain Working Plans, aimed at tackling unemployment, economic inactivity and skills shortages. Mayors will work with their constituent local authorities, employers, voluntary organisations and public services, including Jobcentres, to agree local priorities and set action plans that acknowledge local labour market dynamics and address unemployment.

Careers advisers could act as conduits between the regional priorities identified in local Get Britain Working Plans and the careers support provided within Jobcentres. For example, they could harness local youth-specific skills training commissioned by the strategic authority. They could also benefit from partnerships between the strategic authority and employers aimed at increasing access to apprenticeships and job opportunities.

This locally co-ordinated, more in-depth, in-house employment support would ensure that young people get the tailored support they need to develop a career plan. It would allow enough time for those with complex life circumstances, such as caring responsibilities or health conditions, to talk through their unique challenges to work and be offered appropriate advice and support. This would help young people to feel that the Jobcentre is offering them support, rather than simply putting conditions on them. It's also likely to improve staff morale and retention by offering better opportunities for job progression and development.

² In areas where there are no strategic authorities, higher tier local authorities like county councils or unitary authorities are the accountable actor.

Benefits advisers

- Bring in-house some support currently provided through DWP phone lines
- Answer benefits questions, offer advice on possible benefit eligibility and help to troubleshoot issues
- Refer young people to more specialist advice providers where required

The need for advice

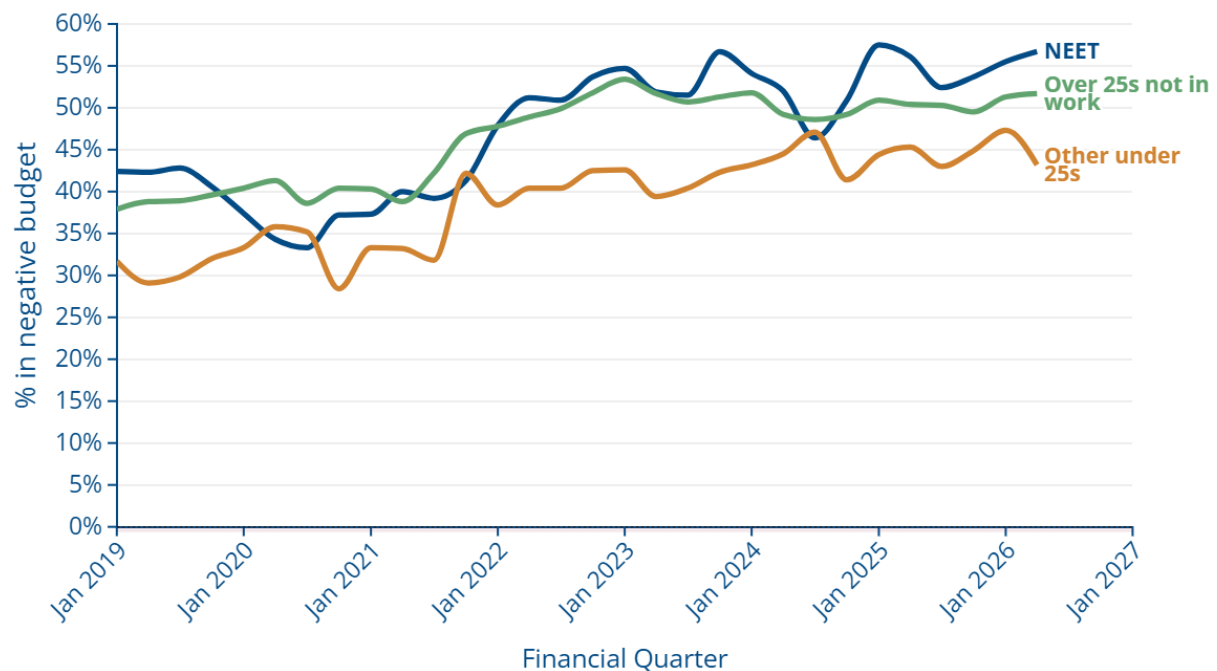
Good advice is key to supporting young people into work and education. They're disproportionately likely to come to us for help with employment, housing and benefit conditionality advice, including sanctions. Many young people are also struggling financially, which can impact their ability to find work.

Our Cost of Living survey found that more than half of 18 to 29 year olds are behind on at least one bill - including those who are in employment. Two thirds have had to cut back on spending in at least one area.³

Last year, we helped nearly 17,000 young people aged 16-24 with debt issues. Young people who are NEET are particularly vulnerable. In the first financial quarter of 2026, 57% of those we helped with a debt assessment were in a negative budget. This is a higher rate than for other under 25s (43%) and over-25s who are NEET (52%).

³ Respondents were asked if they had cut back on any of the following in the last 6 months: spending in any shops, businesses and services, spending on travel, spending on children and family, spending on home improvements and upgrades, spending on any other non-essential items.

Figure 4: The percentage of Citizens Advice clients in a negative budget, by age and NEET status

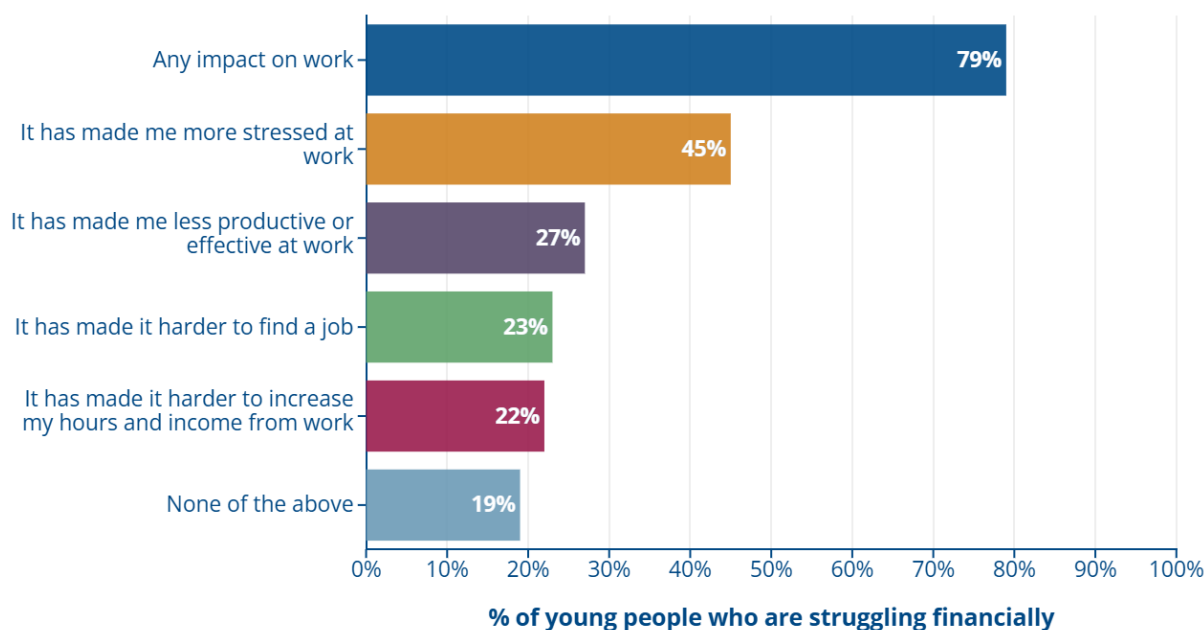


Source: Citizens Advice debt data

Young people who are NEET also tend to have more complex problems. They come to us for help with 8.7 issues on average, compared to our overall client average of 6.1.

Our Cost of Living survey found that struggling financially has a big impact on young people's mental health and, for some, their physical health. In addition, 79% of young people struggling financially said it had a negative impact on their ability to work.

Figure 5: The impact of financial hardship on young people's employment and work search



Source: Cost Of Living survey, 2026

This is unsurprising. Our advisers tell us that people facing complex problems, such as debt or hardship, are likely to struggle to engage with work. Getting support at the right time is crucial for helping young people get back on their feet again.

However, young people often don't know where to go for support with life and benefits issues. Our Cost of Living survey found that 68% of 18 to 29 year olds trust charities or free advice providers to provide them with accurate and unbiased advice if they are struggling to pay their bills. Nevertheless, in reality, more young people get their advice from an AI tool (14%) than a charity or free advice service (11%). This is despite AI tools being much less trusted by the young people (with only 44% reporting that they would trust this source). This suggests that there may be a problem of access - while AI chatbots are readily available, young people may not be easily able to identify where to go to get expert advice.

Many young people on UC have complex needs and turn to their work coach for support with issues such as with their benefit payments or NHS appointments. As discussed, however, work coaches often lack the time and expertise to help them address all of the barriers they face. For example, they may not always know where to refer a young person for external support.

It's therefore crucial that trained advisers are present in Jobcentres so that young people can easily access the support they need.

Bringing support to the front door

We propose bringing benefits advice directly into the Jobcentre, through two routes. The first would be a new DWP benefits adviser role within the Jobcentre, bringing in-house some of the support with benefits claims that DWP currently provides over the phone. The second would be external advice services, such as Citizens Advice, co-located in Jobcentres, who could provide more holistic, in depth support. The value of this approach has already been recognised in the design of Youth Hubs, where employment support is co-located with other support services.

Case workers would refer young people for benefits support to one or both of these services, depending on the issues they're facing. DWP benefits advisers would answer questions, offer advice on possible benefit eligibility and help to troubleshoot issues. For more complex issues, they could then refer people for other DWP support (such as existing UC helplines) or external specialist advice organisations (such as Citizens Advice).

The overall level of support that the DWP currently offers claimants for issues with their benefits claims would remain unchanged. However, this support would become easier to access within the Jobcentre. External support would need to be resourced through additional funding, however this could also reduce the costs of training DWP staff to provide benefits advice.

Benefits advisers based in the Jobcentre would be able to provide quicker and more accessible assistance for initial enquiries and simpler issues. It may be costly for the DWP to train staff in this additional role, which goes beyond the current scope of work coaches. However, it's likely to save significant time for work coaches (or case workers, in the new model) and reduce calls to DWP support lines. It would also help to resolve costly benefits issues before they escalate, reducing costs for the DWP and claimants, as well as reducing claimant stress and related harms.

Young people getting support from the Jobcentre often have multiple complex issues that cause them stress and reduce their capacity to engage in work search activities. Bringing advice services into the Jobcentre building would help

the DWP to develop a holistic and effective service, empowering young people to address the multiple issues they face and support them to gain employment.



Sam is 24 and struggling financially. He was sanctioned for missing an appointment with his work coach, despite the fact that he was unable to attend because he had an appointment with Restart at the same time - a programme his work coach sent him on.

Sam lives with his partner and their 4 children in a rented flat. Two of his children are disabled, so he helps his partner care for them while also looking for work.

They're already in debt and they've had their internet cut off because they were unable to keep up with the payments.

When Sam came to us for help, the family only had enough food for 2 more days. Our advisers helped them access a supermarket voucher and help with buying essential items for their children. They also helped Sam and his partner understand what benefits they were receiving and offered them a debt management appointment.

In a situation like this, Sam needed help to get back on his feet before he could even begin to think about starting work.

Conditionality reformed

[Our evidence](#) shows that conditionality has a consistently negative impact on work coach relationships with claimants, undermining the support they offer. We propose that a new model of conditionality should be introduced that better reflects the world of work and motivates young people to engage.

What's going wrong with the current system

When young people who are deemed fit to work claim UC, they can become subject to conditionality. This means that their benefits payments are dependent on fulfilling a set of work-related requirements, unless they meet certain exemptions⁴. These requirements are set out in a document called a claimant commitment, which the claimant accepts at the beginning of each UC claim. It lists any work search activities, training and other work-related activities they must do to receive their UC payment. The standard requirement is for claimants to spend 35 hours per week looking for work.

Compliance with this commitment is strictly monitored by work coaches. If a young person fails to meet these conditions, such as missing an appointment or failing to apply for a specific job without a 'good reason', they might face a sanction. Sanctions are harsh financial penalties that can result in the loss of up to 100% of the claimants UC standard allowance for days, weeks or even months.

The current conditionality and sanctions regime disproportionately impacts young people. DWP data shows that claimants aged 16 to 24 make up a third (34%) of all people who were sanctioned in February, despite only accounting for 15% of those who could be sanctioned.

As people under 25 receive a lower standard allowance of UC, they already have less to live on. Our advisers frequently help young people who [can't afford their essential living costs](#). When sanctioned, this can push young people further into poverty, and lead to debt, reliance on foodbanks, and even destitution. Those who are hit the hardest are often the most vulnerable - lone parents, disabled people and homeless people.

⁴ For example, due to caring responsibilities or because they're already in work and meet a certain earnings threshold.

The threat of sanctions creates an unequal power dynamic between claimants and their work coaches. Our [previous research](#) found that, rather than feeling supported, people often feel that work coaches are simply waiting for them to make a mistake. Some claimants feel that they need to be careful about every word they say to avoid negative reactions from work coaches, and accept any suggestion, even if they disagree. This also impacts their ability to speak candidly about their barriers to work for fear of being labelled 'difficult' and subsequently sanctioned. This dynamic prevents claimants and work coaches from developing an open, positive and constructive relationship. A work coach we spoke to told us that referring a claimant for a sanction can permanently damage their relationship.

The fear of sanctions also leads some people to prioritise basic compliance, like repeatedly checking their UC journal for appointment notifications, over productive engagement with job searching. In some cases, sanctions may lead to young people disengaging with support altogether. The DWP's own [research](#) found that although sanctions reduce the time claimants spend on UC, this is driven by "increased exit rates into no PAYE earnings", with exit rates into PAYE earnings decreasing.

This issue has been recognised in Youth Hubs, where staff don't sanction young people who don't engage. Rather, they're referred back to the Jobcentre. In an [evaluation of Youth Hubs](#), staff noted that this helped create a 'safe space' for young people to have open conversations.

A new system

To enable young people to transition into the workforce, Jobcentres should shift their focus away from strict compliance towards genuinely tailored support. This reflects the way Youth Hubs work - prioritising positive relationships over a set of strict rules to encourage positive engagement. To achieve this, the reforms to the conditionality and sanctions regime outlined below are necessary.

Introduce a mutual 'support plan'

While work coaches are expected to tailor the claimant commitment, our research shows that in practice this often doesn't happen. As such, the claimant commitment is often administered as a generic, non-negotiable set of rules. The introduction of the claimant commitment in the first meeting with a claimant can

also set a threatening tone for the relationship as they begin with a discussion of requirements and sanctions.

Instead, we propose that the DWP introduces a mutual 'support plan'. Rather than providing a rigid checklist of tasks under the threat of sanctions, the support plan would establish mutual goals and explicitly outline the help the Jobcentre will offer the young person. This gives young people agency in their own career development, rather than simply imposing tasks from the top down, which is likely to increase engagement. Co-creating the support plan also builds self-awareness around their personal goals and areas for development which are vital skills for progression in the workplace.

The support plan would not set out specific steps a young person would have to take, such as applying for a set number of jobs a week. Instead an objective might be to actively seek work by applying for a range of appropriate vacancies. This approach would avoid the 'tick box exercise' of applying for unsuitable jobs simply to meet a target. Young people would then feel more invested in their work search efforts, increasing motivation to engage with Jobcentre support.

The support plan would clearly state the support that the DWP would provide to help them achieve their goals. For example, the Jobcentre might commit to offering in-depth careers advice to identify skills and suggest suitable employment options. This would help to make the relationship more two-sided and increase accountability for both case workers and claimants.

It would be important that the support plan isn't formalised in the first appointment. Young people's first interactions with the Jobcentre would instead be focused on positive career discussions and relationship building. The support plan would be discussed over several appointments, with consultation from other staff members, especially careers advisers, as needed. Ideally, the exact amount of time allowed to finalise the plan would remain flexible, but it would be reasonable for the DWP to set a limit on how long this should take. As needed, case workers and claimants would be able to initiate a review of the support plan if something isn't working or their circumstances change.

Currently, the Welfare Reform Act 2012 specifies that claimants must usually accept a claimant commitment to qualify for UC. In order to introduce a support plan as standard and only apply a claimant commitment in the case of poor

engagement, it's likely that there would need to be changes to primary legislation.

Reforming conditionality to mirror the workplace

Young people would be expected to meet regularly with their case worker or career advisers. Case workers would be responsible for making genuine, repeated attempts to contact and encourage young people who appear not to be engaging, much like a manager might in the workplace. However, they would not be responsible for sanctions.

This approach aims to keep young people engaged through creating a supportive environment. Rather than being threatened with sanctions, young people would be asked about the reasons they're struggling and how these can be addressed. This approach would be particularly valuable for young people who are dealing with significant challenges such as caring responsibilities, health problems and financial stresses.

It also actively prepares young people for the workplace, where they would be expected to be in regular contact with their manager, address constructive feedback and work together to solve problems when they come up. Supporting young people to establish a relationship with authority based on trust and mutual cooperation is likely to help set them up for success in the workplace.

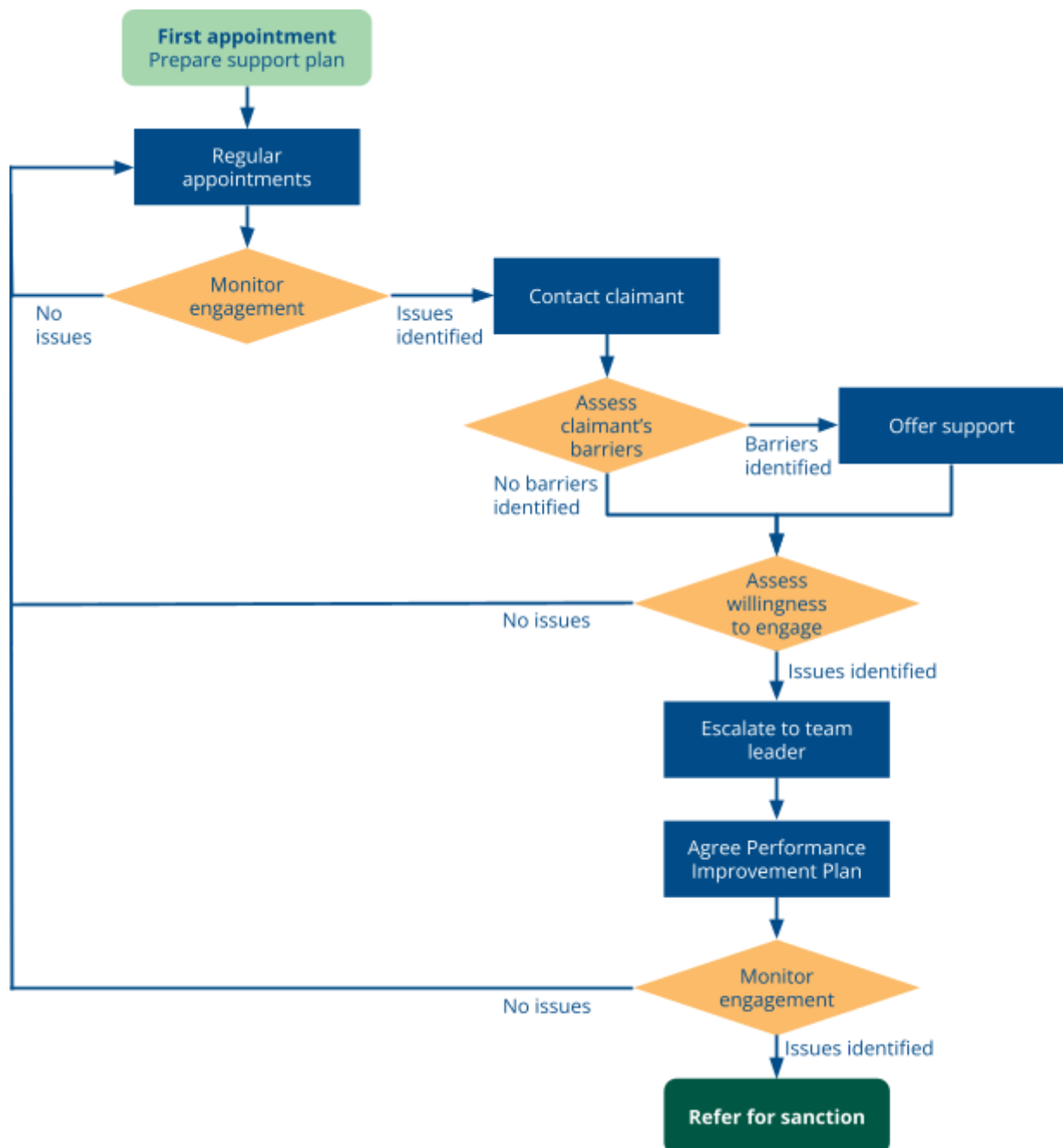
If young people repeatedly refuse to engage with their case worker and (if relevant) careers adviser, this would be escalated to a team leader. We would expect there to be ongoing conversations between team leaders, case workers and careers advisers about levels of engagement and whether claimants are taking action appropriate to their circumstances. Case workers and advisers would therefore still monitor claimants, but wouldn't make any decisions, particularly around sanction referrals. This mirrors Youth Hubs, where young people who don't engage are referred back to the Jobcentre rather than immediately sanctioned.

Sanctions should strictly be a last resort. Young people would be put on warning by a team leader if they aren't making genuine attempts to find work or training, in the style of a Performance Improvement Plan. At this stage it would be appropriate to set out a more formal commitment of specific tasks that are required of them, akin to the existing claimant commitment. This would more

closely mimic the way that performance is monitored in the workplace, which would be helpful for young people who have limited or no experience of work.

If a young person consistently fails to engage after undergoing a formal review and warning process, the team leader would refer them for a sanction. Figure 6 illustrates the process that case workers and team leaders would follow to monitor conditionality and refer claimants for a sanction.

Figure 6: Workflow diagram showing the process for monitoring conditionality



These changes to conditionality should result in fewer sanctions, which would lessen the hardship they often cause. It could help young people secure more sustainable work by reducing the pressure to accept low-paid jobs with little prospect of progression out of financial desperation following a sanction. Fewer sanctions would also reduce administrative and decision maker costs.

An example from the Netherlands

The Netherlands offers a compelling alternative to our current compliance focused welfare system. It demonstrates a more tailored and compassionate approach, with better checks and balances around the use of sanctions. As the UK looks to reform its own system, these are key principles we should take on board.

Through its recent reforms to the Participation Act, the Netherlands has prioritised a human-centric approach to employment support, built on trust. Instead of making people complete standardised work search tasks, the new framework requires a claimant's responsibilities to be tailored to their individual needs and capabilities. Recognising that education and work aren't always realistic for some young people, the reform also introduces 'social participation' as a valid form of engagement.

Claimants are encouraged to independently shape this participation, which could include activities like taking a course, performing volunteer work or providing informal care for a loved one. Similar to our proposed mutual support plan, the Dutch approach gives young people agency to shape their own path forward, increasing motivation and trust rather than imposing a largely 'one-size-fits-all' process.

This reform is also set to abolish mandatory benefit sanctions for people who fail to fulfil their responsibilities. While municipalities will still have the discretion to sanction claimants who don't meet their personalised responsibilities, client managers will no longer be forced to apply an automatic reduction for a set period of time. Instead, they will have the freedom to tailor the sanction to the seriousness of the claimant's action and their individual circumstances (including their family situation). Municipalities will also be given formal powers to issue a warning instead of a sanction, and a sanction must not be applied if a claimant isn't at fault for failing to meet their obligations.

The sanctions process in the Netherlands:

1. Investigate the claimant's personal circumstances to understand exactly why the obligation was not met and give claimants the opportunity to share their side of the story.
2. Apply a proportionality test, carefully weighing the interests involved to ensure that the adverse financial consequences of the sanction aren't disproportionate to the purpose the sanction is trying to achieve.
3. Provide clear justification to the claimant for any decision to impose a sanction, explaining how their personal circumstances were taken into account during the decision-making process.

This thorough and personalised approach aims to get decisions right the first time and detect claimants' problems early on. When decisions are made carefully and transparently, claimants are more likely to understand and accept them, helping to restore trust in the government.



Ezgi is 23 and lives in a rural area which made the trip to the Jobcentre difficult. Even after her bus route to the Jobcentre was cut, her requests for telephone appointments were rejected. She came to Citizens Advice for help after she was repeatedly sanctioned for missing in-person appointments.

As a result of the sanctions, Ezgi built up over £4,000 of priority debt.

"I have anxiety, and it was 100% exacerbated by the stress of the situation," she says. "I was worrying constantly [...] I lost 20 kilos during this period, just from stress. It was really difficult."

Ezgi's local Citizens Advice advisers talked through her problems, gave her job searching tips and helped her tackle her debts. They also recommended that she ask her local council for a work coach. He rang her weekly to support her job search and was *"extremely helpful"*, says Ezgi.

"My advisers helped me to see a way forward instead of constantly looking back and getting stuck. In a way, it was a bit therapeutic, because I could sit down and talk to them about it and I knew they wouldn't judge."

Thanks to this support, alongside Ezgi's tireless efforts, she was able to secure a job. She's no longer claiming benefits and has managed to clear her rent arrears.

"I remember crying when I got the email telling me I'd got my current job," she says. "I was so happy, because I'd looked for

work for so long."

She continues: *"I think there needs to be more understanding that there are young people out there who really do want to work, but they don't know where to start, because they might be doing it on their own. I also think there should be more coverage of the support that is on offer. A lot of the help that I received from Citizens Advice I didn't even know existed."*

Support in the community

Hub and spoke model

In addition to reforming the Jobcentre itself, the DWP should go further in connecting Jobcentres with local Youth Hubs, local employers, other community organisations and devolved authorities. This would help them to reach out to young people in the community who may otherwise struggle to engage with their support offer, or who may view the Jobcentre negatively - including those who aren't in receipt of benefits.

The [Young people and Work interim report](#), commissioned by the government, notes that almost half of NEET young people may be in this category. These so-called “hidden” young people may be better reached through a hub and spoke model, whereby local outreach is combined with a central support location.

Young people interviewed by our Help to Claim service told us that they want Citizens Advice to have a physical presence in public spaces like libraries, colleges or youth organisations where they could easily access advice. By co-locating Jobcentre staff in a ‘friendly’ community space, alongside charities or youth organisations, in conjunction with the local authority, there's greater clarity for young people on where they can go for help.

The government has already recognised the value of this in Youth Hubs, where work coaches are situated in trusted community venues, alongside local organisations that offer wider support. This means young people can access tailored employment, skills and training guidance under the same roof as vital wrap-around services, including health, housing and wellbeing support.

Operating as a ‘one-stop shop’ allows young people to connect with multiple services and the relaxed environment and longer appointments allow them to build stronger, trusting relationships. An [evaluation of Youth Hubs](#) found that both staff and young people valued this approach. It's therefore welcome that the government has decided to [significantly expand](#) the number of Youth Hubs across the country.

However, while this holistic approach is extremely valuable, the current execution doesn't go far enough. Access to a Youth Hub is capped at six months, which is insufficient to meet some young people's needs. In addition, Youth Hub staff members may be located next to other services, but [research suggests](#) they're often not integrated into a community of support. They don't always share information and may not make direct referrals to other support services. Similarly, Youth Hubs don't always work as closely with Jobcentres as they should. The DWP's [evaluation](#) found that staff would value better communication and collaboration.

As a result, young people face unnecessary friction when needing to access other support. It also reduces the ability for local support services to co-ordinate efforts and proactively reach out to disengaged youth.

To maximise impact, there needs to be greater integration between different support services, including employment support, charities, community organisations and the local authority. This will reduce the barriers young people face to getting the right support.

Organisations co-located together should share data, refer young people to each other and also make use of the resources of the main Jobcentre 'hub' such as external courses and employment support for young people who are ageing out of youth support. In addition, Jobcentre staff can benefit from the local expertise of organisations that work with young people in the area, or who may be able to reach underserved communities.

All of this could be co-ordinated as part of local Get Britain Working plans to ensure that efforts are joined up and part of a wider local strategy. A hub model would allow mayors and other higher-tier local authorities to integrate housing, health and education with employment support.

3 things you need

A crucial goal of reforms should be to reduce friction for young people who need to access support. While every local area has its own unique population and constellation of charities and community organisations, there are 3 important parts to creating a cohesive, co-located support system that supports young people's engagement.

1. Accessibility

Co-location venues and Jobcentres must be accessible to disabled people, people without a car and those whose first language isn't English. This means ensuring venues take into account access needs for disabled people, are accessible via public transport, and offer appropriate translation options.

Ideally, co-location venues should be chosen because they're places that young people naturally go to anyway, such as youth clubs. This would increase the visibility of the support on offer and make it easier for young people to attend.

Finally, it's important that support is delivered in a trauma informed way. This means providing advice and employment support in a way that prioritises the safety of young people, builds trust, offers choice, works collaboratively, involves young people in decision making and takes into account individuals' needs and contexts.

2. Warm handovers

A key part of reducing friction for young people is ensuring that they can be easily passed to the support they need. Ideally, a co-location model would work on a 'no wrong door' principle, whereby a young person attending any service event or drop-in could be informed about and directed to other support, including employment support.

To do this well requires services to either be able to literally send the young person 'next door', or otherwise to be able to directly refer them via an agreed upon referral mechanism. Our advisers tell us that direct referrals are crucial for ensuring young people are able to access support. Signposting alone often leads to a drop-off in engagement.

Ensuring seamless transitions requires good communication between co-located services and the Jobcentre to ensure that responsibilities are clearly defined and understood. By offering complementary services, co-located organisations can reduce their own admin burden and ensure young people are able to work through issues more efficiently and effectively.

3. Data sharing

Finally, data sharing agreements are crucial for reducing friction for young people, measuring outcomes and proactively addressing issues.

Local Citizens Advice offices tell us that many Jobcentres are unwilling to directly refer people to Citizens Advice due to data protection concerns. This delays people's access to support and, in some cases, means they may not access support at all. A lack of data sharing agreements is a serious blocker to integrated local support and public services, leading to duplication and delays.

To ensure seamless transitions, co-located youth support services, local authorities, Youth Hubs and Jobcentres must develop data sharing agreements. Ideally, local health services and schools would also be part of this. This would make direct referrals possible and mean that young people don't need to repeat themselves to every organisation. This would save time and reduce the barriers for young people who need to access support.

Data sharing agreements would also allow organisations to avoid duplication of support, keep track of outcomes and spot trends in access and pathways. It would enable feedback loops, with organisations able to share best practice, communicate issues and improve how the co-located support offer works.

Finally, data sharing agreements could also be used to offer proactive support before someone enters into a crisis. For example, when a young person is due to leave care, or is in debt to the local council, data sharing between the local authority and the Youth Hub would enable the right support services to proactively contact the young person to offer advice and support. This early intervention ensures that young people are informed about the support on offer and can reduce the risk of any problems escalating to crisis point. This is particularly important for reaching young people who are furthest from the Jobcentre.

An example from Rushmoor Citizens Advice and Step by Step

To better reach young people in the local area before they reach crisis point, Citizens Advice Rushmoor has partnered with youth homelessness charity Step by Step.

Step by Step's Launch programme works with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. They support them towards sustainable accommodation and progression into education, training or employment.

Citizens Advice Rushmoor now has an adviser co-located at one of their supported accommodation sites. They also take direct referrals from Step by Step across the county. Our advisers provide specialist advice and help with issues including housing, benefits, debt, employment and financial pressures. The charities securely share relevant information and work together to provide a warm handover, so young people don't have to repeat their story and receive joined-up support.

This means young people can access the support they need in a familiar, trusted environment. It removes the need for them to navigate multiple different services across multiple locations, as the two charities work alongside one another to deliver integrated support. This is particularly important for young people who are facing significant upheaval and insecurity in their daily lives. As a result of co-locating support, issues can be tackled quickly before they escalate.

Conclusion

The young people we see at Citizens Advice are facing numerous challenges. The Jobcentre should be a place where these problems are identified, taken into consideration and, where possible, addressed. However, far too often the Jobcentre is instead a place where young people face a lack of understanding, employment advice that isn't fit for purpose, and the threat of sanctions that can destabilise their already fragile finances.

If the government is serious about getting more young people into work, they must reform the Jobcentre. This means taking seriously the need for tailored support, for encouraging relationships built on mutual respect, and for helping young people deal with the issues that are holding them back.

Part of this must mean rethinking the work coach role. Jobcentre staff are being asked to do too many different things in too little time. By allowing them to specialise as case workers, employment advisers or benefit advisers, Jobcentres will ensure that young people are able to get the support they need while also boosting workforce retention.

Another part is making sure that Jobcentre staff can build a trusted relationship with the young people they support. This necessitates a rethink of how conditionality works. Sanctions hurt young people. They also harm engagement. Instead, requirements should be tailored to individuals and those who don't engage should get a chance to change before they have their financial lifeline taken away.

The Jobcentre doesn't need to do everything. Local authorities, advice charities, youth and community organisations are already experts in their local area and are trying their best to help the young people they meet. Youth Hubs show how a reformed system can better support young people. What the government does need to do is get better at bringing these groups together. This means prioritising proper data sharing agreements, good communication and genuine accessibility for young people.

Done well, a reformed employment support system would ensure that young people have access to the right support at the right time. This would help remove barriers to work and encourage young people to take the steps they need to take to move forward.

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We provide free, confidential and independent advice to help people overcome their problems. We are a voice for our clients and consumers on the issues that matter to them.

We value diversity, champion equality, and challenge discrimination and harassment.

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