

Get Britain Working: Reforming Jobcentres

Response to the inquiry
call for evidence



March 2025

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About Citizens Advice

Citizens Advice provides free, confidential and independent advice to help people overcome their problems. In 2023-24, we gave advice to 2.7 million people: 1.8 million people over the phone, 760,000 by email, and 168,000 through web chat. We helped over 700,000 people with issues related to benefits. 48% of the people we help are disabled, have a long term health condition or both.¹

The geographic range of this response covers England and Wales.

Our response to this consultation is informed by:

- Research with frontline advisers across the network of our local offices in England and Wales. We explored advisers' experiences of supporting people with Universal Credit (UC), through:
 - Interviews with 10 advisers, conducted between September and December 2023
 - A survey of 256 advisers in October 2024.
- Interviews with 15 UC claimants from across England, conducted between March and August 2024, recruited through local Citizens Advice offices.
- Visits to 2 Jobcentres in England, where we observed appointments and spoke informally with Jobcentre staff.
- Evidence forms² submitted by advisers about issues the people they help face concerning UC and work coaches.
- Citizens Advice caseload data.

Our response is based on the experience of the people coming to us for help, our advisers who support them, and the evidence we see every day. We have answered only those questions to which we feel our expertise is relevant.

¹ Citizens Advice service data from financial year 2023-24.

² Frontline advisers submit evidence forms to highlight the problems the people we support face when interacting with the benefits system.

Summary

Our research has found that the Jobcentre is too focused on monitoring compliance with claimant commitments, which undermines trust and creates a fear of sanctions. Work coaches' ability to provide employment support is further undermined by their high workloads, short appointment times and focus on compliance.

A key factor in the effectiveness of work coach support is the quality of relationships they are able to build with claimants and there is a great deal of variation in these relationships. Some work coaches use empathy, encouragement and friendliness to establish trust and collaboration, while others are more critical and even hostile. Consistency of relationships is key - those who saw the same work coach over a sustained period of time tended to feel more supported than those who saw multiple work coaches.

Employment support is limited as appointments are often administrative and impersonal with little tailored advice. Claimants are too often encouraged to apply for jobs that are inappropriate or poor quality which they find demotivating. Specialist employment support emphasising trust and respect is needed, alongside better signposting to external support services.

Work coaches should provide tailored, sensitive support to claimants who are older, have health conditions, have experienced domestic abuse and/or are facing hardship. This should include providing reasonable accommodations for appointments and ensuring job recommendations are appropriate. Although discrimination appears to be relatively rare, stronger safeguarding is needed to prevent, identify and address discrimination against claimants.

UC claimants often perceive the Jobcentre as a place where they will be strictly monitored but offered comparatively little support in return. Claimants told us they often find the Jobcentre intimidating and unwelcoming. Privacy within the Jobcentre was also a key concern for many claimants.

The strength of the connections between Jobcentres and external partners varies by location. DWP should ensure that Relationship Managers within Jobcentres consistently work with advice providers to increase two-way communication.

We haven't included policy recommendations in our response, but for our full list of recommendations please see our report [here](#). We are also in the process of writing a more in-depth proposal on how a reformed Jobcentre could be organised, developing the ideas presented here. We will share this proposal in due course. In this response we focus on current Jobcentre practice.

The purpose of Jobcentre Plus

Are the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) sufficiently ambitious? How effectively is it meeting its aims?

Key points

- The Jobcentre is too focused on monitoring compliance with claimant commitments, which undermines trust and creates a fear of sanctions.
- Work coaches' ability to provide employment support is undermined by their high workloads, short appointment times and focus on compliance.
- The work coach role is overly prescriptive which prevents them from effectively using their discretion to provide tailored support to claimants.

Currently, the Jobcentre has two primary aims. The first is monitoring claimants' compliance with their commitments, and the second is supporting people to find work. The focus on monitoring compliance is detrimental to claimants and risks undermining the aim of helping people to find work. The latter aim isn't ambitious enough and is undermined by the focus on compliance. In practice, the employment support that work coaches can provide is very limited.

Work coaches' role in checking that claimants are complying with their claimant commitments can create a problematic power dynamic. The threat of sanctions hung over many of the claimants we interviewed, who talked about sanctions as a threat or something to fear. This is a particular issue where claimants find their commitments unclear. Of those who came to us for help with unclear claimant commitments in 2024, 25% also needed advice on sanctions. A number of claimants told us that they felt the risk of sanctions undermined trust in their relationships with their work coaches. The imbalance of power caused by the risk of sanctions can hinder meaningful conversation and shift the claimant's priority from engaging with support to avoiding a sanction referral.

The second aim of the Jobcentre is to provide employment support to help people find work or increase their hours. We found that work coaches are managing high workloads which afford little time to provide employment support to claimants. While the majority are passionate about helping people,

they lack time and training to provide meaningful support. Many claimants told us their meetings felt like a 'tick box' exercise and 'a waste of time'. Both claimants and our advisers said that even well-intentioned work coaches often fail to offer more than a fortnightly compliance check.

While work coaches do provide some employment support, this is very limited as meetings feel rushed, impersonal and inconsistent. Meetings typically last 10 minutes, which makes it difficult to offer in-depth advice. Appointments are also typically the only face-to-face interactions that people have with the benefits system, so claimants often ask questions about technical benefits issues, which take up time that could be spent on employment support. Better and more consistent referrals for benefits advice are needed to reduce the burden on work coaches.

Many claimants told us that they were not offered personalised job coaching and had little opportunity to discuss their goals or preferences. Work coaches typically didn't provide guidance on what jobs might suit them or how to apply for them. Our advisers have also expressed concern about the quality of employment support provided by work coaches. In a survey of Citizens Advice advisers, about half (48%) said that claimants typically didn't find their work coaches helpful in supporting them to move into work or increase their hours.³

Discretion is fundamental to providing truly tailored and effective employment support. However, its use by work coaches is constrained by the prescriptiveness of their role. Work coaches are expected to follow pre-set guidelines for claimant commitments or training plans unless claimants meet very specific conditions. For example, there is little flexibility for work coaches in the requirement to send claimants to Restart, but some claimants found this course unhelpful or even inappropriate.

To meet their aims, Jobcentres need to show flexibility in recognising individual needs and affording sufficient time to help people in complex circumstances. Work coaches should acknowledge the challenging labour market and prioritise long term, rewarding work for claimants, rather than 'any job'.

³ 105 advisers (41%) reported that clients find work coach support "not very helpful" in securing employment and 17 (7%) said they were "not helpful at all".

To what extent does JCP have an “image problem”? How might this be addressed?

Key points

- UC claimants often perceive the Jobcentre as a place where they will be strictly monitored but offered comparatively little support in return.
- In our research the Jobcentre was described by claimants as ‘depressing’, ‘demeaning’ and ‘stressful’.
- Many claimants found the visible presence of security guards intimidating and unwelcoming as they entered the Jobcentre.

While some claimants had positive experiences of the Jobcentre, many perceived it negatively. These issues often stemmed from their experiences of the buildings, security and reception staff and were reinforced by work coach appointments that offered little employment support.

As described earlier, claimants frequently reported a feeling that appointments were a ‘tick box’ exercise. They often felt that these problems came from the system as a whole, such as issues with bureaucracy and capacity, rather than individual staff members. However, some people perceived the work coaches themselves to be indifferent, or even lacking care about claimants’ wellbeing and circumstances.

There is a common perception of a lack of reciprocity between work coaches and claimants. Jobcentre staff often place strict requirements on claimants’ conduct but don’t always offer the same treatment in return. One claimant gave an example of a poster requesting polite and respectful behaviour at the risk of sanctions, but they felt their work coach was not polite or respectful. Claimants reported that some work coaches did not admit to or apologise for mistakes they made, but were inflexible if claimants did not comply with their commitments.

Our research showed that many benefits claimants experience the Jobcentre as an intimidating and uncomfortable place. A number of claimants we spoke to told us that the Jobcentre environment has a negative impact on their appointments. Interviewees described their local Jobcentres as ‘depressing’, ‘demeaning’ and ‘stressful’. One person told us they dread going there because of the atmosphere.

Some highlighted the high numbers of security staff, who made them feel unwelcome and intimidated. One claimant told us they felt anxious around the 2 security guards at their Jobcentre. They said, "I feel like a criminal. Like I've done something wrong, just by being a Jobseeker." These experiences can mean that claimants are stressed and uncomfortable at their appointments, putting more strain on their relationship with their work coach.

Variations in the friendliness of the staff, particularly security, meant that claimants at different Jobcentres had very different perceptions of their visits. One claimant told us that the first Jobcentre they visited was a "horrible" experience. At the second Jobcentre they attended, they felt claimants were treated as "human beings" and appreciated that the security staff were friendly and called them "sir".

The experience in Jobcentre Plus

How effective is the support provided by Work Coaches, particularly to groups that experience disadvantages or particular challenges in the labour market (e.g. young people, disabled people, older workers)?

Key points

- A key factor in the effectiveness of work coach support is the quality of relationships they are able to build with claimants and there is a great deal of variation in these relationships.
- Some work coaches use empathy, encouragement and friendliness to establish trust and collaboration, while others are more critical and even hostile.
- Consistency of relationships is key - those who saw the same work coach over time tended to feel more supported than those who saw multiple work coaches.
- Employment support is limited as appointments are often administrative and impersonal with little tailored advice.
- Claimants are too often encouraged to apply for jobs that are inappropriate or poor quality which they find demotivating.
- Work coaches should provide tailored, sensitive support to claimants who are older, have health conditions, have experienced domestic abuse and/or are facing hardship. This should include providing reasonable accommodations for appointments and ensuring job recommendations are appropriate.
- Stronger safeguarding is needed to prevent, identify and address discrimination against claimants.

Poor relationships

Some of the claimants we spoke to developed very good relationships with their work coaches. They especially valued work coaches showing empathy about their personal circumstances, belief in their abilities, and friendly encouragement, whilst acknowledging barriers to work. Positive comments were

made by our interviewees about humour and small talk, which generally made conversations more personal. People recalled with fondness things like smiling, or asking about their children or health. One of the interviewees recalled an atmosphere of mutual respect and politeness between them and their work coach.

However, whilst some work coaches go 'above and beyond' to support claimants into work, we found some concerning attitudes and behaviours. Some interviewees reported hostility towards claimants, amplified by the perceived lack of trust and impatience. A common sentiment was that work coaches wanted to catch people out and waited for them to make a mistake. Work coaches' tone was sometimes described as condescending and belittling. One claimant told us that, while they know they are entitled to claim UC, they feel staff "hate you for actually claiming it."

Claimants felt like some work coaches wanted to punish them, for example by referring them for sanctions without a fair reason. Even when the relationship was mutually respectful, claimants often pointed to an unhealthy power dynamic. They feared questioning their work coaches' suggestions in case they would be put down as difficult or work-shy. This dynamic prevents claimants and work coaches from developing a candid, positive and constructive relationship.

One claimant told us about a particularly difficult relationship where they felt they would be in trouble no matter what they did. They told us, "I said you [the work coach] really don't seem to be on my side at all. And he said, 'Well, at the Jobcentre we're not on your side.'" Their work coach also criticised their English language skills, despite being a native speaker, and refused to put them forward for roles involving a lot of speaking.

Continuity of work coaches is also very important to building a strong relationship with claimants. Claimants often see multiple work coaches through the duration of their claim. This means that claimants are required to repeat their personal stories multiple times, including details that are confidential and even traumatic. One of the claimants we interviewed had 6 work coaches in less than a year.

Ineffective employment support

Interviewees often reported a lack of a personal approach in Jobcentre support. Meetings were widely perceived as administrative in nature, sometimes centred

around forwarding job advertisements. Many claimants told us that they were not offered personalised job coaching, including little discussion of their goals or preferences. Work coaches typically didn't provide guidance on what jobs might suit them or how to apply for them. We frequently heard that it felt like work coaches were reading from a script.

Our advisers have also expressed concern about the quality of employment support provided by work coaches. In a survey of staff from local Citizens Advice offices, about half (48%) said that work coaches were generally not helpful.

One claimant felt the goal of work coach appointments was to schedule another appointment and one adviser said that it was to have seen people, rather than to help them. Meetings were described as meaningless and a waste of time, with the same questions being asked repeatedly.

One claimant told us that the emphasis on getting 'any job' was demotivating. They had a part time job and were completing a part time master's degree, but their work coach still asked them to increase their hours. However, the jobs on the Jobcentre's website were very limited and didn't match their level of skills and experience.

Whilst many work coaches do their best to accommodate people's experience and aspirations, our research showed that some pressure claimants to pursue unsuitable jobs. Our interviewees described this as "nagging" and said their work coaches sent them jobs they viewed as unsustainable in the longer term. This included jobs with high turnover of staff, unsuitable hours and limited job security.

Disabled people

Disabled people are disproportionately likely to come to us for help with conditionality and the claimant commitment. 57% of those who came to us for help with conditionality-related issues in 2024 were disabled and/or had long term health conditions, compared to 47% of our overall clients. Of those who came to Citizens Advice for help with conditionality in 2024, easements relating to a health condition or disability was the second most common issue, after sanctions.

A commonly reported problem was that work coaches lack understanding and don't provide easements for many health issues and disabilities. This is

particularly the case for invisible illnesses, mental health problems, arthritis, recovery from surgery or diabetes. Some claimants also told us that their requests for phone appointments were refused, even if their health prevented them from attending. For example, one of our interviewees had a phone call request refused when they were in a hospital.

Some claimants reported work coaches downplaying their health conditions and showing little consideration for barriers they faced. One claimant we spoke to had left their previous job due to arthritis and had told their work coach they couldn't undertake physically demanding work. Yet, their work coach threatened them with a sanction if they didn't attend a trial day as a chef at a fast food chain, which the claimant described as a waste of time for them and the employer.

People with caring responsibilities

Claimants often reported that their caring responsibilities were overlooked by work coaches. Appointments were scheduled during school pick-ups and on very short notice, sometimes requiring claimants to arrange last minute childcare or take children home from school early. An adviser told us about a parent who needed to look after their children when their partner was taking a driving test. The claimant was sanctioned for non-attendance despite giving notice to the DWP. This seems to disproportionately affect single parents and parents facing hardship as they are less likely to be able to arrange childcare at short notice. Our data suggests that single mothers are particularly likely to be affected by these challenges. 90% of those who came to us for help with single-parent easements in 2024 were women.

Carers for disabled people have similarly reported instances where work coaches fail to take their caring responsibilities into account. Instead, they pressure claimants to look for work or ask them to work more hours than they are able to. One person came to us for help after their work coach told them they needed to work more hours or increase their earnings. They already worked 20 hours a week and cared for their disabled partner and didn't feel able to meet this requirement.

It seems there is insufficient training for work coaches on how to accommodate caring responsibilities. A lot of people who come to us for help face difficulties finding affordable childcare, while dealing with pressure from the Jobcentre.

Some single parents are allowed to have fewer work coach appointments and don't need to be available for work for as many hours per week as other claimants. Yet, some of our advisers reported work coaches being unaware, or not informing claimants, of these easements.

Older claimants

Some claimants over 50 years old expressed frustration that work coaches don't understand their unique, often negative, experiences of the labour market. They felt that their age was not accepted as a barrier to finding work and felt patronised when expressing such difficulties, especially by younger work coaches.

One older claimant told us they wanted to talk to their work coach about their concerns that many positions required a lot of physical work, including lifting and carrying. However, their work coach only gave generic advice that didn't take into account their age. This suggests that work coaches may need additional training in how to support older claimants and provide tailored job search advice.

Some people told us they were referred for jobs they were physically incapable of doing, such as one claimant in their 50s, who had multiple health conditions including a bad back. They experienced continuous pressure from their work coach to apply for physically strenuous positions, some of which required operating heavy machinery. They were also sent to interviews for jobs they had no qualifications for.

People who have experienced domestic abuse

Among those who have experienced domestic abuse, some have reported that they aren't always treated with care and dignity by DWP and Jobcentres. They told us that some work coaches fail to acknowledge or be sensitive towards the effects of domestic abuse. One person was asked by their work coach to work more hours despite caring for their child and having a mental health condition caused by domestic abuse. They were also sanctioned for failing to attend Jobcentre appointments due to caring responsibilities. The adviser tried but was unable to contact the Jobcentre's Vulnerable Customer Lead to properly explain the claimant's situation.

The DWP provides specific guidance for work coaches to help determine the claimant commitment for those who have experienced domestic abuse. In such circumstances, any work-related requirements should be paused for 13 weeks. However, our advisers have seen cases in which this guidance is not applied. One person came to us for help after their claimant commitment appointment. They had a 3 year old son who was awaiting an autism diagnosis, and had experienced domestic violence which had affected their memory and mental health. Despite providing fit notes as evidence of this, they were told by their work coach to deal with the default requirements.

People facing hardship

People in severe hardship might be less likely to benefit from other support provided by the Jobcentre. One of our interviewees recalls being sent on multi-day external training and not being able to afford lunch in-between sessions. They reported that other participants were also skipping food. Another claimant came to us for help because they couldn't afford transport to attend a job interview. They were still paying off their previous budgeting advance and their work coach hadn't told them about the Flexible Support Fund.

Similarly, homeless people often face difficulties regularly accessing the internet, which puts them at risk of being sanctioned for missing appointments if they don't see journal notifications due to not having a phone or internet connection.

There is a central role for Jobcentres in signposting people to appropriate services, including training providers, adult education, charities and advice providers. Currently this happens inconsistently with some relationship managers primarily focused on training provision rather than charitable partners. The challenges that claimants face should be treated holistically as issues with housing, health and financial difficulties can negatively impact people's ability to find and stay in work.

Discrimination

The evidence from our interviews suggests that explicit discrimination is very rare. Most of the advisers we spoke to had seen no examples of discrimination by work coaches. One person noted that it used to be more of an issue but had improved in recent years.

In our survey of advisers, 12% said they had seen clients who they thought may have been discriminated against by work coaches or DWP in relation to conditionality or sanctions. While this is a minority, it is concerning that 1 in 8 of our advisers have come across this issue. When specifying what examples of discrimination they had seen, our advisers most often raised concerns relating to health and disabilities, including mental health. Race, language barriers and learning difficulties were also mentioned.

A concerning incident regarding religion was also reported to us in an interview. One work coach made disapproving comments about the claimant's approach to religious holidays and other elements of observance (they were both of the same faith). For example, they asked the claimant about their decision not to wear religious symbols. Combined with previous negative interactions, this made the claimant scared of attending the Jobcentre. They felt they were subject to discrimination and bullying. The claimant also mentioned they were threatened with sanctions when raising a complaint.

How suitable is the JCP estate for achieving the Government's aims, and meeting the needs of different claimants? What models could it look at to improve its facilities?

Privacy within the Jobcentre was a key concern for many claimants. The limited space and lack of dividers between desks at Jobcentres made claimants feel exposed. In March 2024, only around 30% of the Jobcentre network had one or more private interview rooms available for work focused interviews. We recommend that all Jobcentres provide private rooms that claimants can request for their appointments when needed.

During work coach appointments, people are often expected to share private details of their lives. The perception that other people in the Jobcentre can listen to what is being said makes this process more difficult. Seeing people waiting can also add to the pressure on claimants to finish their appointments on time and not go into the details of their situation. It also means that one loud incident can disrupt other appointments and negatively affect the atmosphere.

Working with others

How well does JCP connect with external partners? For example, schools, further education, employment support organisations and the third sector?

We heard from Jobcentre staff, Citizens Advice colleagues and other stakeholders that the strength of the connections between Jobcentres and external partners varies by location. Some relationship managers within Jobcentres are excellent at connecting with local partners, including advice providers, and were highly commended by charity partners. However, stakeholders in other areas had fewer interactions with their local Jobcentre and felt the staff at these locations focused primarily on their relationships with local training providers. We also heard from some work coaches that they are not always that aware of the services provided by charity partners and advice providers and found it difficult to make appropriate referrals for claimants.

Citizens Advice helps people find a way forward.

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.

We're here for everyone.

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Published March 2025.

Citizens Advice is an operating name of The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Registered charity number 279057.