

Benefit Sanctions and Mental Health

SAMH Briefing Paper

Introduction

Conditionality, including the threat and application of sanctions, are core features of the UK social security system, including Universal Credit. A sanction means a reduction in the level of benefit payment to someone because that person has not kept to the conditions of their benefit claim. From March 30 2020 during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic conditionality and sanctions were suspended. This meant existing and new claimants for UC, JSA and ESA did not need to undertake job seeking or work related activities.¹ Conditionality and sanctions was reintroduced in July 2020.²

SAMH has long been concerned about the negative effect sanctioning has on people with mental health problems.³ This paper explores the issue of sanctions and mental health, including recommendations for change.

This briefing is based in large part on the work of Evan Williams from the University of Glasgow. It draws particularly on articles: **Unemployment, sanctions and mental health: the relationship between benefit sanctions and antidepressant prescribing** (Journal of Social Policy: 2019) and his research dissemination paper: **The impact of benefit sanctions on mental health.**^{4,5}

Key Findings

- Conditionality and sanctions are a core feature of the UK's social security system for income replacement benefits.
- Sanctions have a negative effect on people's mental health.
- Increases in the application of sanctions are associated with increases in both anxiety and depression and the prescription of antidepressants.
- There is little to no evidence that the imposition of benefit sanctions or the threat of sanctions supports the goal of helping people move into paid employment.
- The UK Government does not publish sanction data disaggregated by health condition or disability of claimant, making it impossible to accurately understand the extent that people with mental health problems are affected by sanctioning.

¹ DWP [Coronavirus support for employees, benefit claimants and businesses](#) March 2020

² DWP [Benefit sanctions statistics to July 2020](#) November 2020

³ SAMH [It Was A Confusion – Universal Credit and Mental Health: Recommendations for Change](#) 2019

⁴ Evan Williams [Unemployment, sanctions and mental health: the relationship between benefit sanctions and antidepressant prescribing](#) Journal of Social Policy 2019

⁵ Evan Williams The impact of benefit sanctions on mental health: Research dissemination paper 2020



Policy Recommendations

- We believe the UK Government should again suspend conditionality and sanctioning, at least until the pandemic is fully under control
- The UK Government should use learning from the period of coronavirus pandemic, where conditionality and sanctions were suspended, to inform reforms of the conditionality regime including abolishing sanctions
- The UK Government should collect and publish robust routine data on the number of people sanctioned, disaggregated by disability and medical condition

Benefit Sanction – Facts and Figures

Sanctions can be applied to people in receipt of income replacement benefits. These are Universal Credit (UC) and the legacy benefits that it replaced, Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). A sanction can be applied where someone does not meet their 'work related commitments'. For people in receipt of Universal Credit, their work related commitments will be set out in their Claimant Commitment which is agreed at the start of a Universal Credit Claim.⁶ Reasons for application of a sanction include: failure to attend work-focused interviews; failure to undertake an agreed amount of job searching; refusal to take up an offer of paid work without good reason and loss of job or pay due to misconduct.⁷

The level and length of a sanction depend on a number of factors. In regards to Universal Credit there are four levels of sanctions: Lowest; Low; Medium; and Higher.⁸ The lowest sanction, applied for failure to attend a work focused interview, lasts until the person attends or takes part in one, plus seven days. The highest level sanction can be applied for failure to take paid employment when offered a job, or failure to apply for a job when told to do so by a work coach. This lasts for 91 days.⁹ If someone incurs further higher level sanctions within a year of the initial sanction, payment of Universal Credit will be suspended for 182 days (six months).¹⁰

The latest data for Scotland, prior to the suspension of job seeking and work preparation commitments resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, shows that:

- In March 2020 3,564 people in receipt of Universal Credit were sanctioned)¹¹

The sanction rate for ESA and JSA recipients is much lower than UC very low with the number of sanctions imposed in March 2020 in single figures.¹² The DWP state the much higher rate of sanctioning for UC compared to legacy benefits is

⁶ DWP [Universal Credit and your claimant commitment – Guidance](#) July 2020

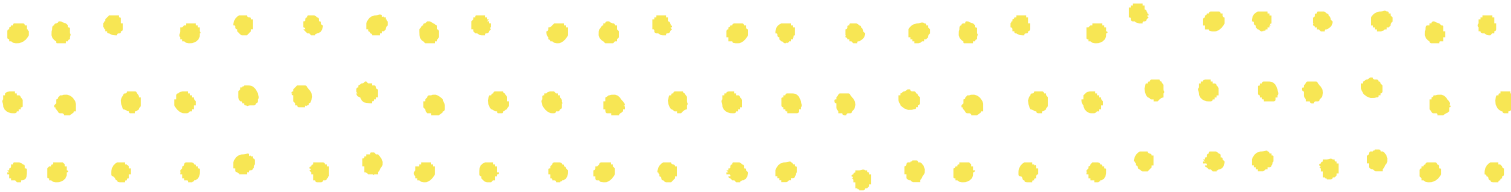
⁷ DWP [Universal Credit and you – Guidance](#) October 2020

⁸ DWP [Universal Credit and you – Guidance](#) October 2020

⁹ DWP [Universal Credit and you – Guidance](#) October 2020

¹⁰ DWP [Universal Credit and you – Guidance](#) October 2020

¹¹ DWP StatXplore [UC Sanction Rates](#) [accessed November 2020]



primarily due to the way in which claimants who miss mandatory work-search interviews are dealt with under UC compared to legacy benefits – a conclusion supported by research from the House of Commons Library.¹³ Under UC a sanction is applied rather than the benefit claim stopped completely, as in the legacy system, when an advisor interview is missed without good reason.¹⁴ Worryingly reliance on sanction data may as a consequence under represent the number of JSA and ESA claims stopped due to failure to adhere to advisor interview requirements.

Data on the number of sanctions applied to people with mental health problems is lacking. The UK Government does not publish sanctioning data disaggregated by disability or medical condition. However, there is some evidence that people with mental health problems are being disproportionately sanctioned. Freedom of information requests from 2013 found that 58% of all ESA sanctions in the first six months of 2013 were applied to people with a mental health condition or learning difficulty.¹⁵ Data from FOIs made by Mind in 2015 found that people with mental health problems in receipt of out of work benefits were up to three times more likely to receive a benefit sanction than be supported into employment.¹⁶ For context the latest ESA data shows that in Scotland 50.6% of all claimants have a mental health or behavioural problem, this higher than any other group.¹⁷

To ensure clarity and inform effective policy making it is crucial that the UK Government collects and publishes regular disaggregated data on sanctions. This should include as a minimum data on underlying disabilities and health conditions of benefit claimants who have been sanctioned (adverse and non-adverse sanctions). Without this we cannot be sure of the scale of the issue affecting people with mental health problems.

Sanctions and Mental Health

Despite growing recognition that sanctions are damaging to people's mental health, robust data demonstrating the negative impact of sanctions on mental health has historically been lacking.¹⁸ The study undertaken by Evan Williams from the University of Glasgow sought to provide additional quantitative evidence exploring the link between sanctions and deteriorating mental health.

Mr Williams examined whether there was correlation between benefit sanctions and antidepressant (SSRI) prescribing. Specifically he looked at Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) sanctions applied between (2010 -2015) across English local authorities. This period coincided with the start of UK coalition Government and the increase in severity of the

¹² DWP StatXplore [JSA Sanction Decisions – all decisions made](#) [accessed November 2020]

¹³ House of Commons Library [Why are sanction rates higher under Universal Credit?](#) 2018

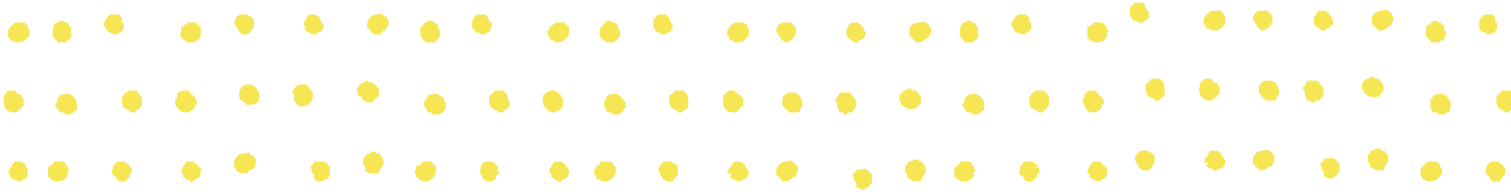
¹⁴ House of Commons Library [Why are sanction rates higher under Universal Credit?](#) 2018

¹⁵ UK Government Freedom of Information request 2014-79 March 2014

¹⁶ Mind [People receiving ESA due to their mental health more likely to be punished than helped into work](#) 2015

¹⁷ StatXplore [Employment and Support Allowance Caseload](#) [accessed Jan 2021]

¹⁸ Evan Williams [Unemployment, sanctions and mental health: the relationship between benefit sanctions and antidepressant prescribing](#) Journal of Social Policy 2019



sanction regime introduced by the Welfare Reform Act 2012.¹⁹ While the research looked at JSA specifically, it is reasonable to expect the conclusions to apply to Universal Credit as it has a broadly similar regime of conditionality, sanctioning and hardship assistance.

The key findings were that following the 2012 reforms²⁰:

- Increases in the application of sanctions were associated with increases in both anxiety and depression and the prescription of antidepressants.
- Every ten additional sanctions at the local authority level were associated with up to eight additional people self-reporting that they suffered from anxiety and/or depression
- A one percentage point increase in the local authority level sanctions rate was associated with a 2-3 percentage point increase in the likelihood that unemployed claimants reported suffering from anxiety and/or depression.

It is clear from the results that JSA sanctions were associated with deteriorating mental health and increases in depression and anxiety.

Evidence from people who use SAMH's community services supports the conclusion that sanctions damage mental health. People supported by SAMH told us that even in cases where they have not been sanctioned, the ever present threat of sanctions is highly distressing:

"I was finding it hard to travel, finding it hard in interviews, finding it hard with applications for jobs and everything... I was very close to getting sanctioned and that really scared me. It blew me out the water a bit, really. I'm a bubbly, cheery person, and I was really, really low" (SAMH Service User)²¹

Another person told us:

"As I suffer from severe depression and anxiety, this information [threat of sanction] forced a downward spiral, and I was, at rock bottom, seriously considering taking my own life as a result. I could see no way of surviving if my benefits were reduced or stopped (I have no family or other support), and the fear of this happening swamped my every moment, both waking, and the brief periods of exhausted sleep I managed to snatch." (SAMH survey respondent in receipt of ESA and threatened with sanction – 2018)²²

¹⁹ Evan Williams [Unemployment, sanctions and mental health: the relationship between benefit sanctions and antidepressant prescribing](#) Journal of Social Policy 2019

²⁰ Evan Williams The impact of benefit sanctions on mental health: Research dissemination paper 2020

²¹ SAMH [Fit For Purpose?](#) 2016

²² SAMH [Work and Pensions Committee Benefit Sanctions Inquiry – SAMH response](#) 2018



Sanctions and Employment

The UK Government's stated purpose for conditionality and sanctioning in the social security system is to encourage people into employment. In response to the House of

Commons Work and Pensions Committee's 2018 Benefit Sanctions enquiry the Government stated:

"Work is the most effective route out of poverty. The Government is committed to helping people find work through a wide-range of support, targeted to each individual's personal circumstances. Conditionality and sanctions motivate claimants to engage with the support on offer to look actively for work, and thereby to move into work, while ensuring the system is fair to the taxpayer."²³

SAMH agrees that work is essential for both reducing poverty as well as supporting people's mental health. But there is little to no evidence to support the claim that the imposition of benefit sanctions or the threat of sanctions motivates people or increases the likelihood that they will move into paid employment. Indeed the [Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change Project](#) (a research coalition of six UK universities from 2013-2018) found that welfare conditionality is largely ineffective in supporting people into paid employment, with sanctions resulting in significant negative consequences for benefit claimants including:²⁴

- Undermining the likelihood of engagement or advancement in paid work
- Disengagement from the social security system
- Increased debt, poverty and reliance on charitable providers and informal support networks in order to meet basic needs
- Exacerbating existing physical and mental illnesses and triggering high levels of stress, anxiety and depression

The Welfare Conditionality Project propose a fundamental review and move away from conditionality in the social security system. In the short to medium term, recommendations regarding disabled people include:

- An end to sanctions for disabled people, with reform to prioritise supporting and incentivising those disabled people who choose to work to enter sustainable paid employment
- A replacement of the (UC and ESA) Work Capability Assessment (WCA).²⁵ The WCA is a face to face medical assessment used to determine eligibility to UC and ESA. We know from research with people that SAMH support that the WCA does

²³ House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee [Benefit sanctions: Government Response to the Committee's Nineteenth Report of Session 2017–19](#) February 2019

²⁴ the Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change Project [Final Findings Report 2018](#)

²⁵ the Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change Project [Final Findings Report 2018](#)

- not work for people with mental health problems, too often causing distress to claimants and inaccurately assessing the impact of someone's mental health.²⁶

Coronavirus

At the time of writing we are still in the midst of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Due to the unprecedented social restrictions and social distancing required to prevent the spread of disease, the UK Government introduced fundamental, though temporary, changes to social security conditionality and sanctioning.

As the UK entered lockdown in March 2020, the UK Government suspended conditionality including the requirement for people in receipt of benefits. This included suspending the need to fulfil job search and availability requirements of Universal Credit Claimant Commitments.²⁷ As a consequence the application of new sanctions was entirely suspended – though sanctions that had already been applied were not revoked.

In July 2020 conditionality, including sanctioning, was reintroduced.²⁸ The UK Government stated that claimants would have to fully comply with Claimant Commitments or risk sanctioning. Assurances were provided that new and existing Claimant Commitments would be updated for to account for the “new normal” in light of the coronavirus, taking account of local job markets and personal circumstances.²⁹

At the time of writing, data is not yet available to show the impact of the reintroduction of sanctioning. At SAMH we are extremely concerned that conditionality and sanctioning has been reintroduced at a time when the coronavirus pandemic is still affecting our daily lives. Since the beginning of the pandemic we have seen a significant increase in unemployment and job insecurity as well as increased distress. Research undertaken by SAMH during the pandemic found that 50% of respondents felt their mental health got worse the longer the coronavirus pandemic continued.³⁰ We believe the UK Government should again suspend conditionality and sanctioning, at least until the pandemic is fully under control. The Government should then take the opportunity to evaluate whether the absence of sanctioning has any impact on the likelihood of people moving into employment.

²⁶ SAMH [Fit for Purpose](#) 2016

²⁷ DWP [DWP's response to coronavirus \(COVID-19\) 4 May 2020](#)

²⁸ UK Parliament [Covid-19: Meeting Increased Demand for Services 29 June 2020 Volume 678](#)

²⁹ UK Parliament [Universal Credit Question for Department for Work and Pensions UIN 62431, tabled on 22 June 2020](#)

³⁰ SAMH [research-reveals-decline-in-wellbeing-since-lockdown-began](#) November 2020



Conclusion

Evidence from people supported by SAMH and academic research confirms that benefit sanctions do not work for people with mental health problems. Sanctions and the threat of sanctions increase distress and depression and anxiety. We also know that there is no evidence that sanctions encourage people into paid employment.

It is clear that there is no justification for the continuation of the current sanction regime at the heart of the UK's social security system. At a minimum sanctions should be abolished for people with mental health problems, with people instead being supported into work through enhanced and personalised job seeking support.