

Routes out of hardship

What effective employment support looks like for people facing hunger



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Executive summary

People facing hunger and hardship want to work but too often they are locked out of employment by a combination of poor health, caring responsibilities, financial insecurity, inaccessible services, and employment support that is not designed around their needs. This research finds that, current approaches to employment support and the conditionality regime often undermine, rather than enable, progress towards sustainable employment for people facing complex barriers to work. The findings point towards a different model: one built on trust, personalised support, financial security, and long-term progression rather than monitoring, compliance, and short-term job outcomes.

This research comes at a critical moment. The UK government is undertaking significant reforms to employment support stemming from widespread consensus that generic and punitive approaches that focus on monitoring rather than support are not working. A patchwork of new pilots and programmes have been established, testing more voluntary, tailored and specialist support, including working more closely with local employers and health services. Our findings chime with this direction of travel but also identified where the government needs to go further to effectively reach people with more complex barriers to work.

Hunger and hardship – and their knock-on impacts – present significant barriers to work. This highlights the importance of Universal Credit rates rising to a level that at least covers life's essentials. However, this research also found that people needing food banks often need support with finances, wellbeing, confidence, language and housing before being able to engage with careers advice, training or job search support. We spoke to food banks that are playing key roles in employment journeys by providing volunteering placements to build work readiness, signposting to employment support or hosting advice sessions in trusted environments. This implies that effective employment programmes for people experiencing hardship would benefit from much deeper connections with wider services, including advice and crisis support, and from being delivered in trusted community settings where appropriate.

This research utilised an iterative qualitative design with initial scoping activity conducted through a rapid evidence review and interviews with sector experts to build a foundational understanding of the existing evidence base. We then conducted interviews with food banks in the Trussell community to explore frontline delivery experience of supporting people with complex barriers into employment pathways and gain insight into how employment support can sustainably prevent hardship. Working with the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), we also conducted a series of workshops with lived experience experts and food banks to understand the experiences of groups with complex barriers to employment in more depth, and identify solutions to inform policy recommendations.

The research focused on three groups with complex barriers to employment:

- Disabled people and people with long-term health conditions.
- Young people aged 18-25.
- Carers and single parents.

Key findings

Participants and food banks consistently described a cyclical relationship between hardship and not being in work. Poverty and financial insecurity create practical barriers to work, including the inability to afford transport, training courses, internet access, identification documents, and appropriate clothing. At the same time, being out of work and ineffective employment support can reduce people's confidence, worsen physical and mental health, and make it more difficult for people to move into employment.

Four interconnected categories of barriers emerged:

- **Individual barriers** including poor physical and mental health, lack of confidence, trauma, fear of sanctions, digital exclusion, and caring responsibilities.
- **Environmental barriers** including poverty, transport costs, inaccessible infrastructure, and a lack of suitable jobs.
- **Procedural barriers** relating to how support is delivered, including inflexible appointments, poor communication, and problems with work coach continuity and capacity.
- **Structural barriers** including a 'work-first' approach, inflexible conditionality requirements, and the use of sanctions.

A central finding was that trust is fundamental to effective employment support. Many participants described existing employment support delivered through the Jobcentre as characterised by fear, distrust, repeated assessments, and the ever-present threat of sanctions. This discouraged people from sharing challenges, reduced voluntary engagement, and made it harder to build productive relationships with work coaches. Participants wanted support that felt collaborative, respectful, and focused on helping them overcome barriers rather than just demonstrating compliance.

The research also found strong support for relationship-based and holistic approaches. Participants consistently emphasised that employment support cannot be separated from wider issues such as mental health, housing, debt, caring responsibilities, language barriers, and financial insecurity. Effective support was described as support that addresses the whole person, recognising that many people are not immediately job-ready and require a period of confidence-building, stabilisation, skills development, or specialist support before they are ready to engage with the labour market.

Food banks highlighted their distinctive role in supporting people who are furthest from employment. Staff described how trusted community settings, holistic support, volunteering opportunities, and integrated advice services help people address barriers, build confidence, and take gradual steps

towards employment. These approaches were often viewed as more engaging and accessible than traditional employment support delivered through statutory services alone.

Across all participant groups, there was strong criticism of the current social security conditionality regime. Participants described requirements as overly rigid, insufficiently tailored to individual circumstances, and focused on compliance rather than supporting people to make meaningful progress towards work. The threat or use of sanctions was seen as increasing stress, worsening hardship, damaging trust, and pushing people further away from engagement with employment support. Food bank staff consistently reported seeing people pushed into crisis and need to turn to food banks for support as a direct consequence of sanctions.

Participants wanted employment support to focus on helping people access suitable, sustainable and rewarding work rather than 'any job'. They argued that good employment outcomes depend on recognising people's aspirations, skills, caring responsibilities and health conditions, and on creating pathways into employment that support long-term progression rather than focusing solely on rapid job entry.

What effective employment support looks like

Despite differences in personal circumstances, there was strong consensus across groups about what good employment support should involve. Participants consistently identified the need for:

- Trusted, long-term relationships with employment advisers.
- Personalised and flexible support tailored to individual circumstances.
- Greater continuity with the same adviser over time.
- Support that addresses wider barriers alongside employment goals, including financial insecurity.
- Recognition of gradual and non-linear progress towards work.
- Greater flexibility in appointments, communications, and requirements.
- Support for volunteering, training, education, confidence-building, and a wider set of work preparation activities.
- A stronger focus on sustainable employment outcomes rather than solely rapid job entry.

Policy recommendations

Drawing on the research findings and wider evidence base, we put forward five policy recommendations to UK government to improve employment support and the conditionality regime:

1. Invest in the training and capacity of Jobcentre and wider employment support delivery staff.

Government should increase staff capacity, develop specialist roles, and ensure advisers have sufficient time and expertise to build trust, provide tailored support, and address the wider barriers people face.

2. Boost engagement by delivering employment support alongside wider services in trusted community settings.

Greater local flexibility and stronger partnerships between services would enable more holistic, accessible and effective employment support for people facing complex barriers to work. This means supporting the integration of employment support with wider support such as health and wellbeing, housing, language, debt advice, income maximization, and crisis support services. This integrated support should be accessible through trusted community settings.

3. Move away from the 'any job' approach to help people to progress into sustainable and rewarding work that reflects their skills, circumstances, and aspirations.

Employment support should prioritise helping people secure and sustain rewarding work that reflects their skills, circumstances, and aspirations. Success should be measured through long-term employment outcomes rather than rapid job entry alone.

4. Redesign mandatory requirements to foster trust and adult to adult relationships and only use sanctions as a last resort.

Mandatory requirements to prepare or look for work should be less rigid. They should be able to flex according to individual circumstances and recognise a wider range of activities that help people move towards work, including volunteering, education, training, and confidence-building. Employment support should prioritise voluntary engagement and focus on progression rather than compliance with narrow requirements.

The current approach to the social security conditionality regime is widely viewed as being sanction-led and undermines trust and engagement. There should be a wholesale shift to a support-first approach, with sanctions used only after barriers to engagement have been understood, support and flexibility have been offered, reasonable adjustments have been made, and all other avenues have been exhausted. The provision of employment support should be separated more clearly from any decision-making relating to the use of sanctions in order to support stronger relationships between employment advisors and people receiving support.

5. Ensure the social security system provides adequate levels of financial support.

Ensuring people can afford the essentials and can cover the additional costs of disability is crucial for enabling engagement with employment support and breaking down many barriers to work. The UK government should improve Universal Credit adequacy by taking steps

towards an Essentials Guarantee, protecting payments from deductions and caps, and introducing an evidence-based process for setting UC rates so people can afford the essentials. The government should also protect rates of social security for disabled young people to prevent further hardship and enable meaningful engagement with employment support.

Conclusion

This research shows that people facing hunger and hardship overwhelmingly want opportunities to work, contribute to society and improve their life circumstances. However, employment support is most effective when it is built around trust, relationships, flexibility, and financial security. A system relying heavily on the threat of sanctions to drive compliance risks deepening hardship and making employment less achievable. Failing to address barriers created by the experience of hunger and hardship will lock people out of both employment and effective engagement with employment support. By investing in personalised and relational support and better connection with support for wider needs, the UK government has the opportunity to create an employment support system that helps people overcome barriers, move into sustainable work, and make further progress towards a future without the need for food banks.

Introduction

In the year this report is published, the UK government is delivering far-reaching reforms to employment support as part of its plan to 'Get Britain Working', including an overhaul of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Jobcentre Plus offer as well as initiating various programmes and pilots exploring approaches to delivering more holistic, tailored and ongoing support. It has also set out ambitions for greater devolution of employment support, building on existing programmes such as 'Connect to Work', but the extent of that and how the new Jobs and Careers Service will interact with devolved provision is yet to be defined.

Two key government reviews are also being conducted simultaneously which are expected to result in major changes to social security support and employment support provision. The first of these is a review into Personal Independence Payments (PIP), led by Sir Stephen Timms, Social Security & Disability Minister, 'to make sure it is fair and fit for the future in a changing world and helps support disabled people to achieve better health, higher living standards and greater independence including through employment'. The second is a review into why large numbers of young people are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), led by former Health Secretary Alan Milburn. This review aims to diagnose the systemic causes of rising youth inactivity and unemployment and to propose actionable solutions to improve participation.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that the government is committed to creating a 'more preventative state, investing in people's success, rather than paying for failure'. Instead of 'crude cuts' there is a promise to tackle the reasons why people need support with more affordable homes, better employment support and job opportunities.¹ This broad approach is line with public attitudes. Polling by the New Economics Foundation (NEF)² in 2024 showed that the majority (69%) of the public are in favour of prioritising positive support over strict job-seeking rules for people on out-of-work benefits. In 2026, polling from More in Common showed that the majority of the public want a social security system that meets people's needs and believe that the cost of the system should be tackled by addressing the drivers of need for support, not by restricting eligibility or making cuts.³

Food banks across the Trussell community see how the problems in our job market, as well as our housing, health and social security systems, leave people without enough money for the essentials. Every time someone is unable to find decent work in their area, is denied the flexibility at work they

¹ Prime Minister's Office, 2026, *Andy Burnham's first speech as Prime Minister*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/andy-burnhams-first-speech-as-prime-minister-20-july-2026>

² New Economics Foundation, (2024), *Two thirds of public favour support over strict job-seeking requirements for people on benefits*, <https://neweconomics.org/2024/07/two-thirds-of-public-favour-support-over-strict-job-seeking-requirements-for-people-on-benefits>

³ More in Common, 2026, *Causes over cuts: How Britons think we should reform the UK's social security system*, <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/research/causes-over-cuts>

need to manage a health condition, or feels isolated and unsure where to turn for support, they're pushed towards a food bank.

The UK government's proposed reforms to the employment support system offer a vital opportunity to reshape employment support services to be more responsive, person-centred, and effective, and to better protect people from hunger and hardship. It is crucial that these reforms are grounded in robust evidence and provide effective support that enables people to move into good quality and sustainable employment. This is especially important for groups who are both at high risk of facing hunger and often experience significant barriers to obtaining and sustaining work.

This report focuses on the experiences and needs of three of these groups who we know are at greater risk of needing a food bank compared to the general population - young people aged 18-25, disabled people and people with long term health conditions, and single parents and carers.

A cyclical relationship exists between hardship and being out of work

Hardship is deeply entrenched in our communities. In 2025, food banks in the Trussell community alone provided over 2.6 million emergency food parcels. This is a 45% increase compared to 2019, demonstrating the deep scars on people's living standards caused by the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis.⁴ The number of people facing hunger - whether or not they are turning to food banks - also remains unacceptably high. In 2020, 16% of adults were experiencing food insecurity, in 2025 this had risen to 21%.⁵

Exclusion from employment increases people's risk of financial precarity. Hardship is also a driver of unemployment and worsening health. Financial barriers such as the costs associated with training, qualifications and licences, transport and appropriate clothing can lock people facing hardship out of work. Significant periods of unemployment and negative experiences of employment support can also chip away at people's confidence and self-belief making it more difficult to find and take up training or work opportunities. Alongside this, insufficient digital skills and/or access - exacerbated by hardship and inaccessible language causes people to miss crucial communications and struggle to understand the requirements they must meet. A harsh conditionality system, with punitive financial sanctions can drive people further into hardship and has also been shown to push some groups further away from employment.⁶ This cyclical relationship traps people in a cycle that is hard

⁴ Trussell, (2026), *Emergency food parcel distribution in the UK*, https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/eys_factsheet_uk_2025.pdf

⁵ Food Standards Agency, (2026), *Official Statistics: Food and You 2: wave 11 key findings*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/food-and-you-2-wave-11--2/food-and-you-2-wave-11-key-findings#food-security>

⁶ University of Kent, (2017), *Benefits conditionality for disabled people: stylized facts from a review of international evidence and practice*, <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/61793/>

to break. It is welcome, therefore, that the UK government is focused on improving employment support and increasing the number of people able to engage with the support on offer.

Some people face more complex barriers to employment

Every day, food banks in the Trussell community support people facing complex barriers to work. Disabled people and single parents are disproportionately represented at food banks. High numbers of young people aged 18-24, as well as people with caring responsibilities, are also forced to turn to food banks as they cannot afford the essentials. There is also significant overlap in these groups:

- Three in four people (74%) referred to food banks in the Trussell community are disabled, compared to less than three in ten (28%) in the general population.⁷
- One in five (19%) people referred to food banks are from single-parent families, compared to 3% of UK households.⁸
- Working-age disabled people are more likely to have unpaid caring responsibilities than working-age people who are not disabled (29% compared to 15%).⁹
- Over two thirds (68%) of 18-24-year-olds referred to food banks have a disability or illness that limits their day-to-day activities. This compares to 29% of young people in the general population.¹⁰
- A third (32%) of young people referred to food banks, and not in education, employment or training, report that they cannot work due to a health condition.¹¹

When we look to the general population outside food banks, these trends continue. Disabled people in particular face barriers to work from early on, from accessing education, through to recruitment, training, progression and retention in the workplace – the latter often due to a lack of disability awareness amongst employers.¹² There is also a lack of flexible and accessible roles that enable people to work alongside managing caring responsibilities and/or health conditions. Long waits for health care can make it harder to sustain employment as people are unable to access treatment and support, and many struggle to persuade employers to accept reasonable adjustments without a

⁷ Trussell, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

⁸ Trussell, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

⁹ Trussell, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

¹⁰ Trussell, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Additional unpublished analysis.

¹¹ Trussell (2025), *Hunger in the UK*, Additional unpublished analysis.

¹² Disability Unit, (2025), *Disabled people's employment in the UK: a thematic review of the literature*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/disabled-peoples-employment-in-the-uk-a-thematic-review-of-the-literature/disabled-peoples-employment-in-the-uk-a-thematic-review-of-the-literature>

diagnosis.¹³ The scale of disabled people locked out of work, or not supported to fulfil their potential, is significant. The government's 2026 'Keep Britain Working' report stated that around 2.8 million people are economically inactive because of ill health or disability, while millions more are working with health conditions or facing barriers that limit what they can do.¹⁴

Young people who experienced hardship growing up are almost twice as likely to not be in employment, education or training (NEET) as people who didn't experience hardship (27% vs 15%).¹⁵ Research has shown that young people are increasingly locked out of the job market and face an uncertain future, with 45% saying that job opportunities are poor in their local area. This rises to 59% of young people who grew up in hardship – showing how hardship continues to shape young people's futures. Once not earning or learning, social security plays a crucial role in supporting young people to survive, although many still struggle to afford the essential items they need. Facing this depth of hardship, alongside being unable to afford costs such as transport, course fees, equipment and childcare makes it much harder for young people to get back into earning or learning.¹⁶

There has also been a sharp rise in the number of people leaving paid employment to provide unpaid care for an older, disabled or seriously ill relative or friend and one in five of UK employees (20%) now have a caring responsibility.¹⁷ An estimated 1.1 million people have left employment to care in the past two years – the equivalent of more than 1,500 people every day. Almost six in ten working carers say caring has negatively affected their employment at some point, with people being forced to make extremely difficult decisions about their careers, incomes, and futures because they do not have the support they need to balance work and care.¹⁸

Single parents are also facing significant challenges in the labour market, with a notable portion being out of work. In 2024, single parent families accounted for a significant portion of UK households, with around 2.9 million lone parent families reported, representing roughly 10% of all households and about 22% of families with dependent children.¹⁹

¹³ Healthwatch, (2026), *NHS waiting times for non-urgent care - our response*, <https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/response/2026-05-14/nhs-waiting-times-non-urgent-care-our-response>

¹⁴ Department for Work and Pensions, (2026), *Keep Britain Working: a national growth opportunity*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-britain-working-review-update-a-national-growth-opportunity-september-2026/keep-britain-working-a-national-growth-opportunity-september-2026#fn:2>

¹⁵ Trussell (2026), *Financial hardship delaying major life milestones for young people*, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/news/financial-hardship-delaying-major-life-milestones-for-young-people>

¹⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2026), *Falling through the cracks: how childhood hardship shapes life chances*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/falling-through-the-cracks-how-childhood-hardship-shapes-life-chances>

¹⁷ Carers UK, (2026), *Balancing work and unpaid care: A critical issue*, <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/balancing-work-and-unpaid-care-a-critical-issue>

¹⁸ Carers UK, (2026), *Balancing work and unpaid care: A critical issue*, <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/balancing-work-and-unpaid-care-a-critical-issue>

¹⁹ Gingerbread, (2025), *Single parents facts and figures*, <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/our-work/single-parents-facts-and-figures/>

The journey into, or back into, employment for people experiencing hardship is therefore unlikely to be straightforward. This report explores employment support and conditionality for people facing complex barriers to work and identifies approaches that can help deliver positive outcomes in moving people into or closer to the labour market.

The current employment support system can be improved to increase engagement

We repeatedly hear from food banks in the Trussell community and people navigating the employment support and conditionality systems that they are not currently effective and are not delivering the outcomes that both policymakers and individuals want to see. Ineffective employment support and a harsh and punitive conditionality regime drive people to disengage and often push them further away from the labour market rather than supporting them to move into it.

The majority of employment support is currently delivered by DWP through Jobcentre Plus work coaches. People receiving Universal Credit that are available to start work now, or would be able to in the future, are mandated to participate in work search and / or work preparation activities. If they don't meet the agreed conditions for a 'good reason', they are at risk of having a significant portion of their already inadequate income stopped through sanctions.^{20 21} Inadequate income from social security, made significantly worse when sanctions are imposed, reduces people's bandwidth for engaging with anything other than basic survival.²² Poverty has a long-term scarring effect as acknowledged in the interim Milburn review report and is a key risk factor for young people falling out of education, employment or training.²³

This research builds on a large body of existing evidence showing that too often relationships between work coaches and claimants are defined by the constant threat, or reality of sanctions and the associated stress and financial hardship they cause, alongside prescriptive, narrow work search activities. These relationships are often characterised by the absence of trust, a rigid focus on monitoring compliance and a lack of time and space for genuine engagement and tailored support. This approach creates barriers to positive engagement with employment support, as the system discourages the formation of trusted relationships where people feel able to share their personal

²⁰ DWP, (2025), *Guidance: Universal Credit sanctions*, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/universal-credit-sanctions>

²¹ Trussell & Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2026), *Guarantee our Essentials: reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the>

²² Economic and Social Research Council, (2018), *Final Findings Welfare Conditionality Project 2013-2018*, https://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/40475_Welfare-Conditionality_Report_complete-v3.pdf

²³ Department for Work and Pensions, (2026), *Young people and work: interim report*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report>

circumstances and challenges, and participate in adult-to-adult discussions about realistic steps that could be taken to move closer to sustainable and rewarding employment.²⁴

Fears of being judged, misunderstood and 'losing everything' exacerbate this sense of distrust and can make people reluctant to engage in DWP employment support. Frequent work coach changes make people feel frustrated and drained having to re-explain their circumstances and disclose personal information and make it harder to build positive working relationships. When work coaches do not have sufficient time or the right training to deliver meaningful support, meetings feel demotivating, generic and focused primarily on administrative tasks.

Good employment support can help break down some of these barriers to work, but impersonal, one size fits all approaches can push people further from engaging with support and moving towards work. Trussell's 2025 Hunger in the UK research found that people who have needed to use a food bank are often left feeling disempowered, disrespected, and undervalued by a lack of personalised advice and support and by being pushed to apply for jobs that do not reflect and recognise their skills and aspirations.²⁵ Effective approaches must start with recognising and addressing the multiple barriers some people face to engaging with employment support, meeting conditionality requirements and sustaining employment.

Methodology

Research questions

This research aimed to answer 4 research questions, building on previous evidence. We aimed to move beyond the broad principles that are often recommended for employment support (such as being personalised and holistic) to identify what effective support looks like in practice.

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

²⁴ Citizens Advice, (2023), *Found anything yet? Exploring the relationship between Universal Credit claimants and their work coaches*, https://assets.ctfassets.net/mfz4nbgura3g/5BsJ7M44r5Hpr0ek9VL8Jm/2dcc99f09dd00ff4300ce43b47da0d9f/Found_anything_yet___Exploring_the_relationship_between_Universal_Credit_claimants_and_their_work_coaches.pdf

²⁵ Trussell, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

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

Research activity

A broad overview of the research methodology is outlined below, with full detail provided in the Appendices A-D. An iterative qualitative design was used, building learning from each stage of the research into the next. This included:

1. **A rapid exploratory evidence review**
2. **Sector expert interviews**
3. **Food bank interviews**
 - Explored Trussell community food banks' experience of supporting people with complex barriers into employment pathways and insight into how employment support can deliver successful outcomes and sustainably prevent hardship.
 - Engaged UK wide food banks to understand wider best practice which we can apply to policy recommendations.
4. **Policy solution workshops with lived experience experts and food banks**
 - Interpreted initial findings from experts and food banks.
 - Uncovered lived experience perspective on employment support and conditionality.
 - Built understanding of the experiences of groups with complex barriers to employment in more depth, and jointly developed solutions to inform policy recommendations.

Food bank interviews

Building on the insight from the initial scoping phase of the research, semi-structured interviews were then conducted with food banks in the Trussell community who had experience in either directly delivering employment support or facilitating the delivery of employment support by working with external providers within a food bank setting.

Sampling and recruitment

Interviews were conducted with 12 food bank staff working in Trussell food banks across the UK. The following food banks were interviewed; all interviews were conducted with a member of staff- in most cases a Food Bank Manager.

Sampling aimed to include a representative spread of food banks, considering key factors such as food bank operation size, rurality and geographical location. However, it should be noted that employment support is not currently a core service offered by food banks in the Trussell community and as such the initial sample size of food banks offering this service is small at present (around 20-30 locations) and therefore limited sub-sampling.

Food bank	Nation/Region
Abergele	North Wales
Bradford Central	Yorkshire & The Humber
Chelmsford	East of England
Chipping Barnet	Greater London
Clifton, Nottingham	East Midlands
Coventry	West Midlands
Craigavon	Northern Ireland
Epsom & Ewell	South East England
South Liverpool	North West England
East & West Nottingham	East Midlands
Rhondda	South Wales
Truro	South West England

Policy development workshops

We commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to work alongside us to deliver a series of six sequential online workshops with lived experience experts and food bank staff.

Sampling and recruitment

A total of 33 lived experience experts comprising of young people (11), carers and single parents (10), and disabled people and people with long-term health conditions (12) were recruited to take part in the online workshops. In the second round of workshops food bank staff also took part, with one or two staff attending each workshop.

Findings

This chapter brings together findings from both sets of workshops, as well as interweaving insights from interviews with food bank staff. In the initial workshops, participants identified barriers to engaging with employment support, complying with the conditionality regime and sustaining employment. These were then clustered into four key themes which were also reflected during interviews with food banks:

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

An explanation of each theme is provided below, including examples of what form barriers take and how they work to prevent or make engagement challenging. In the second set of workshops, participants reflected on these barriers and discussed principles for effective employment support and the conditionality regime.

It is important to note that there is strong interconnection between these sets of barriers, with food bank staff highlighting during interviews that people accessing food banks are in crisis and often experience complex and interacting barriers to employment including debt, housing insecurity, poor health, trauma, digital exclusion, caring responsibilities, low confidence and unstable finances. Staff emphasised that the people food banks are supporting are usually far from job ready, and that all barriers must be resolved before employment support can succeed.

Individual barriers

Individual barriers raised by workshop participants and during food bank interviews were commonly discussed as preventing people from engaging with employment support. These experiences were particularly noted as being a barrier to people accessing employment support services at all rather than engaging or continuing to engage. Participant responses to scenarios indicated that the impact of these barriers could be potentially reduced through changes to service delivery.

Identifying individual barriers

Health and wellbeing. Participants, particularly in the health barriers group, discussed how physical health conditions but also mental health and neurodivergent conditions, anxiety and stress could act as barriers to engaging with employment support. Food bank staff also highlighted that a lot of the people they support face health barriers, including addiction. Participants provided examples of how interactions with DWP systems could exacerbate existing health conditions. For example, it was observed that Jobcentres can be overstimulating in terms of light and noise. People also reported that the stress of trying to comply with the conditionality regime worsened their mental health and that requirements did not account for them having bad days where they were able to do less than usual. Participants further noted that physical access could be challenging, particularly when the Jobcentre was located a considerable distance away.

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I could have a good day or a bad day and Jobcentre has no understanding and just go by what their screen says.

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Lived experience expert

Health barriers workshop group

Fear, distrust and trauma. Workshop participants often reflected that they did not trust DWP employment support, which led to a reluctance to engage. The word fear was used by several participants. This included fears of being judged, stereotyped, not being understood or mistreated and fear of losing everything. In some cases, this resulted from previous negative experiences of interactions with DWP services but in others, this fear was perceptual. This may relate to the impact of wider negative discourses around social security, unemployment, disability and single parenthood and their potential for stigma.²⁶

²⁶ ²⁷ Stigma has been found to have a profound and negative impact on people's wellbeing and sense of self. Furthermore, it can deter people from seeking support or accessing services, further exacerbating poor outcomes and reinforcing negative stereotypes.

During interviews, several food bank staff also discussed that fear of sanctions can undermine people's trust and engagement with DWP with this fear meaning people are less likely to disclose challenges, seek help or engage honestly with work coaches. Staff felt that this creates a tension because the conditionality regime introduces an enforcement dimension into relationships that food banks view as requiring trust and openness to be successful.

One workshop participant referred to being 'constantly under scrutiny for the crime of being young and disabled'. It is also worth noting that fear is not always unfounded. For example, one participant cited a fear of losing her Personal Independence Payment (PIP) for working. Although a food bank representative in the workshop pointed out that this was not technically the case, 'Right to Try' regulations²⁷ introduced in April 2026 do not entirely protect disabled people from losing their entitlement. Unsurprisingly then, workshop findings indicate negative perception of DWP, with the conditionality regime deterring people from engaging with employment support.

Confidence, identity and self-belief. Participants described how being out of work for long periods of time had reduced their self-belief and how, in turn, low confidence reduced their motivation to apply for jobs. For some people, a positive and confident sense of self had been eroded by negative experiences with Jobcentre work coaches or systems. Some participants spoke about being "made" to feel "inadequate" or "inferior" as a result of these interactions. One participant noted how this led to avoidance behaviours such as "self-sabotage". These findings highlight ways in which procedural elements of the systems contribute to individual-level barriers that reduce meaningful engagement.



Confidence is a HUGE thing especially in the climate we're in at the moment it's so, so damaging.



Lived experience expert

Health barriers workshop group

Skills and resources. Workshop participants described barriers relating to digital exclusion, a lack of qualifications, skills or training, CV gaps, time management difficulties, and a lack of appropriate work clothing. It was noted how these factors could constrain individuals' ability to engage with employment support as well as their ability to comply with the conditionality regime.

Ellis-Sloan, (2014), *Teenage mothers, stigma and their 'presentations of self'*, <https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/publications/teenage-mothers-stigma-and-their-presentations-of-self/>

²⁷ 'Right to try' regulations state that starting work or volunteering itself will not trigger an award review. However, the DWP retains the ability to use the nature of the employment or volunteering to initiate a review. As detailed in our 'Making PIP work' report, some PIP decisions reference employment as a reason for doubting a persons stated functional impairment. Department for Work & Pensions, (2026), *Right to Try: summary*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/right-to-try/right-to-try-summary>

Trussell, (2026), Making PIP work, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/making-pip-work>



There is strong emphasis on online account/journal for Universal Credit and job searching, but this is an assumption that everyone can access online tools and mobile phones the same.



Lived experience expert

Single parent and carers workshop group

A lack of digital skills and/or access could mean that appointments and communications were missed, with food bank staff highlighting that maintaining contact with DWP can be extremely difficult for people without reliable phones, internet access or mobile signal. Staff reflected that conditionality requirements often assumed a level of digital access that people simply don't have. Workshop participants highlighted the challenges of living in temporary accommodation or unstable circumstances, where important items can be lost or stolen.

Some people noted that they wanted to improve their skills and experience but felt that support for returning to education was often minimal and there was a perception that taking on volunteering roles was restricted for claimants on certain conditionality regimes.

Food bank staff emphasised that the conditionality regime prioritises compliance over people's capability to engage in the system. It was felt that the system is overly target driven, and measures whether people comply with requirements rather than whether they are realistically able to engage. Staff repeatedly described a disconnect between the administrative demands placed on claimants and the circumstances they are navigating. One staff member explained that DWP referral systems stop when a barrier is encountered rather than adapting support around the person's circumstances. She described sanctions occurring because people "can't get to these appointments" rather than because they are unwilling to engage. Food banks described a capability gap with the issue being not simply whether people comply with requirements, but whether they have the resources, health, stability and support needed to do so.

Caring commitments. Workshop participants and food bank staff noted that caring commitments could impede people's ability to comply with conditionality requirements, leading to an increased risk of being sanctioned. People felt that caring responsibilities, even when not officially recognised through a carers allowance, should be taken seriously and considered by the conditionality regime. One food bank manager discussed that people don't expect that their work coach would consider that they've got school pick up and drop off times. This was echoed by a participant in the single parents and carers group who noted that appointment times were often scheduled without sufficient consideration of children's pick-up and drop-off needs.



I have had to rearrange video meetings (which I had to fight to get) because they get booked at school run times.

**Lived experience expert**

Single parent and carers workshop group

Addressing individual barriers

Relationship-based personal support. Workshop participants felt that the Jobcentre work coach role put undue emphasis on monitoring and checking compliance and repeatedly called for a relationship built on trust and empathy instead. As one of the food bank representatives noted, building trust and showing care can lead to improved support.



If someone trusts their advisor, they're more likely to be honest about barriers like mental health, debt, or childcare. You can't fix what you don't know. For example; I think trust is the foundation. If a client thinks you're just going to sanction them, they'll hide problems. If they trust you, they'll tell you they missed an appointment because their kid was sick, and you can actually help.

**Food bank staff**

Single parent and carers workshop group

A key theme from the food bank interviews was that trusted relationships are the foundation of effective engagement in employment support. Staff reflected that people authentically engage with support when it is offered through trusted conversations and familiar settings and is integrated into broader support relationships rather than operating as a standalone intervention. Food banks are seen not simply as places that provide food, but as trusted and non-intimidating community spaces where people can disclose employment challenges and engage with support without stigma. Staff frequently described employment conversations emerging organically from welcome conversations, food parcel collections, crisis resolution, signposting interactions, tea-and-chat sessions, or ongoing relationships rather than through formal referrals alone.



It's a safe and familiar environment to them; we find that having that is very successful for wider support.

**Food bank staff**

Food bank interviews

Addressing barriers through holistic support. Workshop participants said that employment barriers cannot be separated from wider issues as people cannot fully engage with employment support

when they are struggling or in crisis. People felt, for example, that providing English lessons to someone with language barriers would be more beneficial in the long-term than them job seeking while this barrier existed. Participants felt that employment advisors were well placed to identify where wider support was needed but they needed sufficient time and the right training to address barriers. The need for joined up services, signposting, social prescribing and peer group support was also discussed as work coaches may not have all the relevant skills or access. This was particularly, but not solely, in relation to mental health challenges.

Insights from the food bank interviews emphasised that employment support must be holistic to be effective. Food bank staff reflected that employment barriers for the people they support are often practical, financial and personal, not simply about motivation or training needs. Staff noted that employment support should address the whole person rather than focusing solely on helping people immediately obtain a job, with one staff member noting that “around 80% of the people we support are far from job ready”.

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It can take a long time for someone to be ready for employability support.

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Food bank manager

Food bank interviews

Better integration of employment support with wider support services. Some workshop participants felt more comfortable receiving support through third sector organisations or reported more positive experiences with employment and other support provided outside of the Jobcentre. As one participant noted, this was in part because support in this context was delivered without conditionality or the fear of sanctions. Furthermore, participants repeatedly argued that their experience of employment support could be improved with stronger links to other services which would support a more holistic approach. Whilst workshop participants did not discuss the detail of the right delivery model for this support, many of the issues they raised and solutions they proposed closely align with a community based and co-located model.

This was supported by food bank staff, in part based on their own experience of enabling access to support focused on 'pre-employment readiness'. Staff reflected that food banks often operate earlier in people's employment journey than the Jobcentre and mainstream employment support providers. Employment support is rarely standalone at food banks in the Trussell community—it is integrated with wider crisis resolution to address areas such as debt, housing, health and wellbeing. An example is Coventry food bank's My Pathway model which focuses on understanding what people want from work, offering personalised support, advice on Universal Credit and work, ongoing mentoring and referral to specialist services.

In addition, food banks are uniquely positioned to reach people furthest from the labour market, with staff frequently discussing how they can engage and meet the needs of people with complex

barriers to employment who other services, including Jobcentre plus, struggle to reach and support. This includes people experiencing acute financial hardship, long term unemployed people, disabled people including those with mental health problems, refugees and migrants, and people lacking confidence or trust in statutory services. The strength of support provided by food banks came through helping people to become more job ready through approaches such as building trust, identifying barriers, providing holistic support, connecting people to specialist services, and improving confidence.

A focus on confidence building and empowerment. Participants reflected that job seeking was a lengthy process which could often be demotivating and challenging. Many people reported low confidence and self-belief. To address these barriers, participants argued that a strength-based approach which focused on positive reinforcement and celebrated small wins was needed. As a participant from the young people group said, employment advisors need to “acknowledge and praise every step forward, whether it's updating her CV, attending a workshop, or making a successful networking contact”. Participants argued this was key in building motivation and confidence and was particularly important for people with complex barriers for whom the end goal of employment might feel a long way off.

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Recognise small steps, for many people with disabilities it takes them a long time to achieve small steps, but it is made to feel like it's never enough.

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Lived experience expert

Young people's workshop group

Food bank staff also reflected the importance of confidence building, citing this as a key element of support they provide to help people to be 'job ready'. For example, at Clifton food bank their focus is on confidence and social reintegration through volunteering within the food bank. The food bank manager discussed one woman in her 60s who had experienced a bereavement and been unable to work for several years. After volunteering at the food bank for 3 months her confidence had increased, and she felt able to engage with the job market again.

Environmental barriers

Workshop participants and food bank staff noted external obstacles stemming from individual circumstances or the contexts in which people lived. These generally lay outside individual and employment support provision as they related to factors often beyond the control of either sphere. These barriers prevented engagement in the first place but were also experienced as demotivating and increased a sense of futility about engaging. Through participant's responses to the scenarios, solutions and ways of working with environmental barriers were identified through a combination of resource-based support and labour market interventions.

Identifying environmental barriers

Poverty-related barriers. Several participants referred to the wider economic environment including the cost-of-living crisis, low wages and rising food costs:



Being swamped in chronic poverty leads to ill health, stress and a lack of decent food...so many costs to just live even an inch closer to comfort.



Lived experience expert

Health barriers workshop group

People also noted that engaging with employment support came second to addressing their “immediate survival”.²⁸ Participants reflected that costs accrued from engaging in employment support. Food banks routinely encounter people who cannot afford phone credit, identification documents and suitable clothing for interviews, lack internet access, do not have appropriate devices and cannot pay transport costs. These cost pressures make engaging with employment support more challenging and less impactful.

One participant also noted that in some cases, it did not always pay to work. Whilst they did not state that this deterred them from engaging with support, it is possible that when pay does not cover basic essentials, some people may conclude that working towards employment is not worth it, particularly if work comes at a cost to caring or health. For instance, another participant reported that, “I work freelance, and for anything I earn, they take it off our benefits. It’s a real deterrent, and far from a supplementary financial aid” (health barriers group).

During food bank interviews, staff also highlighted that conditionality requirements are unachievable when people cannot afford the essentials. Staff reflected that the conditionality regime often fails to account for poverty itself, with people sanctioned due to non-compliance that stems from poverty related barriers rather than an unwillingness to engage. One food bank gave an example of people not having enough money to top up their phone credit, making it harder to maintain contact and fulfil their job search requirements.

Issues with transport and access. Alongside the costs associated with travelling to Jobcentres, workshop participants and food bank staff raised accessibility issues with transport. For example, for some neurodivergent young people, the heat, noise and crowds of public transport could make

²⁸ Although this might seem counterproductive in that employment support can lead to employment which would, in turn, improve someone’s financial situation, research suggests that immediate financial scarcity and stress leads to ‘tunnelling’ or a reduced cognitive ability to focus on anything outside of the immediate problem. When someone is worried about paying bills or feeding their family, it becomes more challenging to engage with longer term goals such as finding employment. (Sharif 2017; van der Veer et al 2024)

journeys stressful and overwhelming. Additionally, public transport timetables did not always align with meeting times and people's needs.



Bus travel in Wales is ridiculously expensive as well. So, getting early morning appointments at peak times is another thing for people.



Food bank manager

Food bank interviews

Participants raised concerns about the time required to travel particularly for people balancing employment support requirements alongside caring responsibilities or other commitments. Several participants commented that travel distances affected the types of jobs practically accessible to them.

Lack of suitable employment opportunities. Where participants had engaged with employment support, it was felt that there was a lack of suitable jobs, as well as a mismatch between available jobs and people's skills, interests and personal circumstances.



The ideal job to fit my circumstances would be a work from home role, but because my previous work experience is in retail, that's all I'm allowed to look at.



Lived experience expert

Single parents and carers workshop group

During food bank interviews, staff also noted that existing employment training programmes often lacked real routes into work, leading to a disconnect between training and real labour market outcomes. Although these programmes could provide qualifications and employability support, they often failed to create clear pathways into actual jobs with one staff member stating they had 'never known anybody to get a job' from a local government funded employment training programme. For some people, this made engaging with employment support feel frustrating or 'pointless'.

A food bank manager reflected that low pay was also often an issue and increasingly there was limited financial benefit to being in work, especially when work was insecure, or involved commuting long distances. They said this was particularly problematic when jobs had a physical or neurological health impact; meaning the pay did not compensate for the mental or physical cost of work. Participants also highlighted a lack of flexible, remote or part-time work which was particularly important for those with caring responsibilities and/or health barriers. There was also a perception that discrimination in relation to gender, ethnicity, age or disability created additional barriers for

securing and sustaining work. Some people felt that employers would consider it a risk to employ someone who has needs and others perceived a need for more neurodivergent friendly employers.

Addressing environmental barriers

Reducing the financial costs of engagement. Participants argued that removing or minimising the financial costs of engagement would improve people's ability to meet job seeking requirements. Suggested approaches included free or subsidised travel, help with the cost of interview clothing, grants to cover returning-to-work costs, and support with childcare expenses.²⁹

Improving the quality and suitability of jobs. Participants argued that employment support should focus on helping people access suitable and sustainable employment which pays sufficiently. Suggested approaches included encouraging employers to create more flexible, part-time, remote and hybrid opportunities including job carving³⁰ where appropriate. People also felt that employers needed incentives to recruit people facing health, disability or caring-related barriers and to make workplaces and recruitment processes more accessible and inclusive for disabled and neurodivergent jobseekers.

A key theme from the food bank interviews was an emphasis on sustainable and stable employment mattering more than 'any job'. Employment support delivered through food banks prioritises job quality, progression and sustainability over narrow job-entry metrics. Staff repeatedly discussed the importance of job quality and long-term outcomes, discussing that poor quality work frequently leads to a return to crisis and food bank need. The state of the local job market also played an important role in shaping opportunities. For instance, Truro food bank highlighted the prevalence of insecure and seasonal work in Cornwall, noting that many food bank users were already employed but still experiencing hardship.



Employment reduces food bank use, but many people remain financially precarious. Job quality matters: people pushed into 'any job' often return to crisis.



Food bank manager
Food bank interviews

²⁹ It is worth reflecting on why these were approaches suggested when JCP does offer some of these means of support. The perception might be a facet of the 'tunnelling' noted above, or a result of low engagement with JCP services. Alternatively, it might be that potential support isn't communicated effectively by work coaches.

³⁰ This is the redesign of jobs or roles around the needs of an individual. For example, hiring multiple people to fill one role over different hours or removing certain duties from a role.

Supporting progression into available employment. Workshop participants felt employment support should help individuals access opportunities that reflected local labour market demand while also aligning with their skills, interests and circumstances. To achieve this, people wanted employment support to offer meaningful and accessible opportunities to gain work experience, volunteering, and training to support movement into jobs.

Food bank interviewees repeatedly argued that training works best when linked directly to employers, vacancies, work placements or sector-specific recruitment pipelines. Rhondda foodbank implemented a mentorship model where employment advisers approach employers directly, arranging placements and continuing to support people once they entered employment. Another example came from South Liverpool food bank who support placements for people with learning disabilities, neurodivergent conditions and other barriers, focusing on teamwork, routine and employability skills before progression into further placements or paid employment.

The importance of volunteering in building confidence and readiness for work was frequently discussed by food bank staff, who highlighted volunteering as a meaningful stepping stone to paid work for many people. Volunteering often creates a bridge between crisis, confidence-building and employment, with staff emphasising that volunteering can help people to overcome isolation, reconnect with a sense of purpose, build social connection, and provide routine and structure. As well as supporting people to volunteer in their wider communities, food banks themselves often offer volunteering opportunities. One example came from Coventry food bank who provide warehouse work experience for people with autism and learning disabilities to build confidence and CV evidence.

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She volunteered for three months and she went, ‘I feel brave enough now that I can start applying for jobs’ and she got one.

”

Food bank manager
Food bank interviews

Procedural barriers

Some of the barriers identified by participants were related to how Jobcentre support is delivered in practice. Participants suggested a number of changes which broadly covered service redesign and improved work coach capability that they felt could address these procedural barriers.

Identifying procedural barriers

Inflexibility of support. Participants raised that mental health and neurodivergent conditions, physical impairments, employment and caring responsibilities affected their ability to attend meetings at specific times or in person. People wanted sufficient notice to plan for meetings. Instead, it was noted that meetings with the Jobcentre were often arranged or cancelled at short notice. In addition, many participants felt it was unfair that if they needed to cancel or rearrange, they were not afforded the same flexibility as work coaches to do this. As a result, participants described missing appointments, disengaging from support, or struggling to meet requirements despite wanting to engage.

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Juggling life around appointments is difficult and overrides finding a job.

”

Lived experience expert

Single parents and carers workshop group

Food bank staff also highlighted that the current Jobcentre system lacks flexibility for people with complex barriers to work and strongly critiqued the perceived ‘one size fits all’ approach. Interviewees frequently discussed that people are sanctioned or disengage because systems do not reflect the realities of barriers such as poverty, mental health conditions, addiction, unstable housing or poor transport. This contrast between the rigid conditionality regime and complex lives emerged strongly throughout the interviews, with food bank staff noting that employment support and conditionality requirements often fail to adapt to individual circumstances. One food bank manager reflected that their relationship with the local Jobcentre had previously involved significant professional judgement and collaborative working but an apparent shift to more prescriptive national processes had reduced flexibility and weakened local problem-solving relationships.

Poor communication and information. Participants described difficulties in both accessing and understanding information about their social security claims and the conditionality regime. People found forms complicated, described the language used on forms as confusing and said it felt like requirements changed frequently. This was exacerbated by the key means of communication (electronic journals) which were often difficult to access leading to missed messages. Several participants said that for those without English as their first language, this was even more challenging. It was additionally felt that the use of three-way telephone calls as a translation service increased confusion. Misunderstanding requirements or missing communications could lead to severe consequences, such as sanctions when they were perceived by their work coach as not complying.

Food bank staff also noted that there are significant structural and administrative barriers in the processes used by DWP and JobCentre Plus which prevent people progressing towards work. It was argued that DWP systems seem to be designed around administrative compliance rather than

people's lived realities and that the people that food banks are supporting often face lengthy processes, repeated explanations and administrative barriers that caused people to disengage.

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The system's needs to be more accessible. It's got to be easier for people to access and not be sanctioned.

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Food bank manager

Food bank interviews

Lack of continuity. Participants reported that they did not have consistent work coaches. Frequent changes meant people had to re-explain their circumstances and repeatedly disclose personal information, which was experienced as frustrating and emotionally draining. Food bank staff also reflected this during interviews, stating that many people they support are pushed to disengaging with the system due in part to a lack of continuity. This also made it harder to develop productive working relationships or feel understood, and many people said they felt judged, patronised, disrespected, disbelieved or spoken down to.

“

I have different advisors and I have to explain myself, education and work but there is no consistency of work advisors which makes it more stressful.

”

Lived experience expert

Single parents and carers workshop group

Insufficient time and training for work coaches. Several participants were concerned about the ability of work coaches to provide the right advice given their training and the time available to them. Participants said work coaches did not have sufficient knowledge or training in disabilities, neurodivergence or coaching approaches. Participants said they were often given generic or unrealistic advice, as advisors had limited understanding of people's individual circumstances. Consequently, people felt that meetings focused on administrative tasks rather than meaningful employment support, which was felt to be demotivating and frustrating.

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My experience has been that the coaches and advisors are overworked, underpaid and don't have the right training.

”

Lived experience expert

Single parents and carers workshop group

Addressing procedural barriers

A flexible approach to appointments and engagement. Participants wanted greater flexibility in the timing, location (online or in person) and frequency of meetings to accommodate employment, caring responsibilities and fluctuating health conditions. This included more appointments within school hours, as well as appointments which avoid school pick up and drop off times and outside of traditional work hours. People with significant health needs wanted fewer appointments.

Through food bank interviews, a need for negotiated expectations from Jobcentre work coaches rather than standardised requirements across all claimants was discussed. Staff gave examples from the people they support to highlight how engagement with employment support increases when support is perceived as realistic, achievable and tailored to people's circumstances. This points towards a model based on personalised progression rather than compliance monitoring.

Improved communication transparency and accessibility. Participants said relatively small changes in communications could improve engagement, for example clearer explanations of requirements, advance notice of appointments and access to information about available support and training opportunities, rather than this being 'gate-kept' by work coaches. Whilst some people felt that online communications (in its current form) were not easily managed or accessed, others suggested that a revised system could be used to build an online repository of helpful materials such as CV templates to help reduce the number of meetings required. Participants also thought it would be helpful to have agendas or meeting plans shared in advance and they recommended allowing people to bring someone with them to 'translate' or take notes.

Consistency and continuity of support. Participants said, wherever possible, people should have access to a single named employment advisor throughout their employment support journey. It was felt that this would reduce the need for repeated explanation of people's circumstances while enabling stronger working relationships to develop.



I would say building trust and providing consistent support are key to helping people find and keep jobs...it creates a much more positive and effective experience.



Lived experience expert

Health barriers workshop group

Food bank staff also emphasised the importance of this relationship with a named employment advisor continuing for a period of time after someone moves into employment, providing support at a crucial transition point where the trust built into the relationship could support a smooth transition into work.

Employment advisor capability. Participants felt employment advisor's professional development should extend beyond job seeking regulations and processes, to mental health awareness, understanding of neurodivergent conditions, disability inclusion and labour market knowledge. People stressed the importance of advisors' interpersonal skills, noting they should be trained in coaching, motivational approaches and de-escalation techniques. Participants advocated for lived experience advisors who would have a better grasp of barriers linked to health, disability and/or job searching.

“

It might cost more in the short term, better trained coaches, more time per person, but it should save money long term through fewer repeat claims and more people actually thriving in work.

”

Lived experience expert

Young people's workshop group

Food bank staff highlighted that the effectiveness of employment support is strongly influenced by practitioner approach and engagement style, not just programme design. The importance of continuity and relationship building with the same employment advisor was viewed as crucial to continued engagement for people with complex barriers to employment. Staff also reflected that where employment support was effective it involved regular staff, predictable schedules, consistent presence within a service and advisors who has the skill to adapt the support they provide to the individual circumstances of the person they are supporting.

Several staff also highlighted two contrasting approaches they saw in the providers who delivered employment support through their food banks. Providers who had a proactive outreach approach, for example greeting people on arrival at the food bank, were more effective than providers with passive provision who sat behind a desk and waited for people to approach them. Staff noted how the proactive approach was much more successful as it placed relationship and trust building at the start of the interaction and didn't require people to build up the confidence to approach the service themselves.

A staged approach. Participants advocated for a staged approach to employment support, beginning with building confidence, identifying and addressing barriers and developing action plans that recognised small steps. It was suggested that employment support should start with initial conversations to identify individual needs, skills, interests and motivations. Participants felt job searching activities could therefore be more personalised and would be more effective if this foundation was in place.

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...this approach makes sense because it focuses on the person, not just the job. If you deal with real barriers like transport or confidence early, and build strong links with employers, you're more likely to get people into roles that actually stick.

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Food bank staff

Young people's workshop group

This was supported by food bank staff, who reflected that the current conditionality regime fails to recognise gradual, and non-linear, progress towards the labour market as meaningful. Several staff discussed that for the people they support, employment journeys are often non-linear, and the current system is not set up to adequately recognise the intermediate steps that are essential to long-term sustainable employment outcomes. Progress towards work for people accessing support from a food bank often involves approaches such as attending a wellbeing programme, volunteering and training, improving mental health and confidence, increasing social contact and addressing underlying barriers such as debt and housing issues.

One example is South Liverpool food bank who partner with an external agency to deliver a supported employment pathway for people with learning disabilities and neurodivergent conditions which utilises a progression model of development before labour market entry. Key approaches include working alongside an employment advisor to identify an individual's goals, developing life and employability skills, social integration and development of teamwork skills with other candidates.

Structural barriers

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

Identifying structural barriers

The work-first approach. Across all three workshop groups, participants said employment support was focused on securing employment quickly, rather than helping people access work that reflected their interests, needs, skills, circumstances or long-term goals. It was felt that this could result in people entering unsuitable employment which they were less likely to sustain over time. A food bank representative pointed out that this could be counterproductive and provided an example of someone who was being supported by the food bank who had been required to increase their working hours. As her current workplace was unable to offer additional hours, she had to look elsewhere. This resulted in her having to take a job further away, increasing commuting expense and time, therefore making her financially worse off and increasing her time pressures.

Inflexible, unrealistic and punitive conditionality requirements. Participants raised concerns about the nature of claimant requirements, which were perceived as unrealistic, inflexible or insufficiently responsive to personal circumstances. As one person noted, "the terms and conditions feel like a job

to access universal credit" (single parents and carers group), raising concerns about how difficult it was to manage the requirements to demonstrate compliance given health conditions and caring responsibilities. Several participants also noted that the tasks they were expected to do were unproductive, such as having to spend 35 hours a week job searching with no time to take on development opportunities such as training which might improve the likelihood of employment. Consequently, participants described conditionality as burdensome and poorly targeted at activity that would genuinely provide a route into work.



A lot of energy is taken up trying to ensure you follow the 'rules' – far less (if any) time to think about or aim towards work.



Lived experience expert

Health barriers workshop group

During food bank interviews, the punitive and impersonal nature of conditionality requirements was also noted. Staff repeatedly described that rather than starting from what people need to succeed and building trust, the system focuses on breaches, failures and missed requirements and that this approach pushes people further away from the job market.

The impact of sanctions. Workshop participants frequently described sanctions as generating fear, stress and financial insecurity. People felt that sanctions were counterproductive, causing increased anxiety, worsening mental health and financial hardship which made it more difficult to engage with employment support and job-seeking activity. Participants also said that fear of sanctions could discourage people from seeking support and felt the possibility of sanctions reduced trust and confidence in relationships with advisers and made open communication more difficult. The fear of sanctions could also lead to people not claiming the support they are eligible for, deepening hardship and preventing them from accessing support which could improve their prospects.

This was strongly supported by food bank staff who reported that the current conditionality regime often creates additional barriers to employment by triggering immediate hardship through sanctions when conditionality requirements cannot be met. Rather than encouraging job search activity, sanctions were viewed as pushing people 'into survival mode.' Staff described people frequently arriving at food banks after being sanctioned, having no money for food and being unable to focus on employment-related activities. Food bank staff argued that financial security is a prerequisite for employment engagement as when income is removed, people become less able, not more able, to participate in employment support.



They are sanctioned and then can't afford the food, they're not looking for work, they're stuck in this cycle.



Food bank manager

Food bank interviews

Addressing structural barriers

Broader definitions of work-related activity. Participants argued that expanding what counted as work-related activity would enable people to participate in activities more likely to result in sustainable employment. This would include volunteering, work experience, supported apprenticeships, accredited training and education. A food bank representative noted that a young person he was supporting who suffered with severe anxiety had secured a supported apprenticeship; “He would not have coped with a traditional approach, two years later he's still there, earning decent money and actually skilled up. No cycle back to benefits. The pure job search pressure would've had him stacking shelves and quitting after a month”. Participants also suggested that ‘softer’ activities which encourage people “out of the house, reduce isolation and introduce routine” (young people group) should be recognised as these contributed to building confidence and work preparedness. Recognising people’s limitations as well as their abilities was also considered to be important.



There should be more programmes to help people into volunteering, free courses rather than the focus being on work. For me, full-time work will likely never be sustainable due to my autism, and they (Jobcentre) need to understand that I can still contribute to society in meaningful ways despite this.



Lived experience expert

Young people's workshop group

Tailored conditionality and claimant commitments. While claimant commitments can be tailored in principle, many participants said their commitment reflected a standardised approach which did not adequately account for health conditions, caring responsibilities or personal circumstances. Participants felt that job seeking requirements needed to be more flexible and respond to individual needs rather than ‘one size fits all’. People considered this to require a more thoughtful and discretionary accommodation of caring needs or wellbeing including a more realistic assessment of the time someone looking for work, with caring commitments or a health condition, could devote to job searching activities.

Support first with sanctions as a last resort. All participants were critical of sanctions, but some people said they had a role in ensuring accountability and fairness. Participants argued that effective employment support should support claimants, with sanctions as a last resort. It was discussed that when claimants were struggling to meet requirements, employment advisors should first seek to understand barriers and provide support to avoid non-compliance, rather than enforce sanctions.



Support systems must recognise that unemployed people are not always lazy. Some are directionless, mentally exhausted, or socially isolated. A supportive relationship can help address these issues more effectively than punishment alone.



Lived experience expert

Young people's workshop group

Similarities and differences across lived experience expert groups

Across all three workshop groups of lived experience experts (young people, disabled people, single parents and carers) there was considerable consistency in experiences and priorities. The dominant message was the desire to move away from a system focused on monitoring, compliance and sanctions towards one that supports people to progress into meaningful and sustainable employment. Participants consistently expressed a desire to work but described significant barriers in finding the right job suited to their circumstances, skills and long-term wellbeing. As one participant from the health barriers workshop noted, "I miss working, but also, I made myself ill working for minimum wage through various employments". Some themes stood out more strongly in particular groups, however, with these similarities and differences discussed below.

Cross cutting themes across groups

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

Trust. Throughout, workshop participants linked trust to engagement. People suggested that when they felt safe, they were more likely to disclose barriers, seek support and remain engaged. Trust was important to many of the proposed solutions, including consistent employment advisors and personalised support. Conversely, the current conditionality regime (including sanctions) actively reduced trust in the support and personnel.

Relationships. Participants frequently described feeling judged or misunderstood by Jobcentre work coaches. Improving relationship quality (in part by ensuring consistency) was linked to trust, disclosure of barriers, confidence building, motivation and engagement. People felt that when they were known and understood by employment advisors, advisors would be able to provide tailored and more effective guidance and support.

Time. This was often noted as a key constraint for participants and employment advisors. Participants described difficulties balancing employment support requirements with health conditions, caring responsibilities and existing work. It was discussed that finding sustainable employment required more than simply job searching, instead needing confidence building, developing skills- e.g. through training or volunteering which was time consuming. However, participants also felt advisors lacked sufficient time to build relationships and provide the personalised support needed to address barriers effectively.

Personalisation and flexibility. Participants were consistently critical of 'one size fits all' approaches. This applied to appointments, communications, conditionality requirements, employment support methods and use of sanctions. People repeatedly called for support that accounted for individual circumstances and needs as well as skills and aspirations.

Distinctive themes across groups

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

Young participants (aged 18-25)

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



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



Lived experience expert

Young people's workshop group

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

Participants who were single parents and carers

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



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



Lived experience expert

Single parents and carers workshop group

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

Participants experiencing health and disability barriers

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

“

For me, it would be the fear of losing the current benefits. If I went for employment support, then if I did get a job and the job didn't suit me, I would lose the current amount of benefits you get (...) And then the fear of if I went back on benefits, they wouldn't give me the same amount, they wouldn't understand, they would keep pushing me and then that would affect my mental health.

”

Lived experience expert

Disability and long-term health conditions workshop group

Policy recommendations

To improve employment support for disabled people, young people, parents and carers, delivering better outcomes for individuals and the economy, the UK government should take five crucial steps:

1. **Invest in the training and capacity of Jobcentre and wider employment support delivery staff.**
2. **Boost engagement by delivering employment support alongside wider services in trusted community settings.**
3. **Move away from the ‘any job’ approach to help people to progress into sustainable and rewarding work that reflects their skills, circumstances, and aspirations.**
4. **Redesign mandatory requirements to foster trust and adult to adult relationships and only use sanctions as a last resort.**
5. **Ensure the social security system provides adequate levels of financial support to enable people to engage and take up opportunities.**

Invest in the training and capacity of employment support delivery staff

There is consistent evidence that Jobcentre work coaches face workload and time pressures which impact on their ability to deliver meaningful support. This results in meetings being experienced as a way for DWP to monitor compliance with the conditionality regime, and not as effective ways to help people overcome barriers and find suitable employment.

Many people with health conditions subject to conditionality requirements report a lack of health and disability awareness from work coaches, meaning easements and adjustments to conditionality or procedures that would better support people to engage are not implemented. Limited time and few non-specialist roles mean barriers such as financial security cannot often be addressed at the Jobcentre itself, with people being signposted to DWP telephone lines and local advice services instead, and tailored support isn't always readily available, for example, the ratio of work coaches to Disability Employment Advisers is around 22:1.³¹ As Citizens Advice has recommended, having specialist social security advisers in Jobcentres would increase access to advice that can maximise incomes, and resolve costly social security issues before they escalate and push people into crisis.³²

A lack of work coach continuity and the threat of sanctions can make it harder to build positive relationships and the necessary trust for people to feel comfortable disclosing personal circumstances and the barriers to work or participation they are facing. This drives feelings of fear and undermines positive action taken by the work coach, as they are also the person who will refer the claimant for a financial sanction which could plunge them into crisis and severe hardship.

Investing in employment support delivery staff capacity and training, as well as splitting roles, would enable advisors to focus on delivering collaborative and holistic support and ensure their relationships aren't defined by monitoring compliance with the conditionality regime. New employment support and careers advice roles could enable people able to access support and advice from experts in supporting particular groups of people and circumstances e.g. disabled people, young people, as well advice tailored to the local labour market.

The UK government should:

- Split Jobcentre and wider employment support delivery roles into more specialisms and ensure people have consistent points of contact who have the time and knowledge to build trust, coach, and provide tailored support.

³¹ DWP, (2025) written question UIN 97237, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-12-04/97237>, and DWP, (2026), written question HL858, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2026-06-11/HL858>

³² Citizens Advice (2025) *The case for case workers: reimagining the Jobcentre service*, <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/policy/publications/the-case-for-case-workers-reimagining-the-jobcentre-service/>

- Increase the skills and capacity of Jobcentre and wider employment support delivery staff to address wider needs related to health, caring, confidence and financial security that are holding people back.

Deliver support alongside wider services in trusted community settings

Programmes such as Individual Placement and Support (IPS)³³ have demonstrated the value of integrating employment support with help to address wider barriers to work. Alongside support with physical and mental health conditions, our research found that people with more complex barriers to employment often need help with finances, wellbeing, confidence, language and housing before being able to engage with careers advice, training or job search support.

Therefore, we propose that local authorities and the new National Jobs and Careers Service should develop deeper working partnerships with other service providers, including voluntary and community sector services, to be able to offer holistic support with overcoming barriers to employment. To support this, we recommend that the government move away from a patchwork of centrally controlled programmes and pots of funding and instead devolve employment support to local or strategic authorities.

Reaching many of the people furthest from the labour market will rely on voluntary engagement but require proactive outreach. Enabling employment support to be accessed in spaces that people already attend, such as community hubs that offer multiple services would create more awareness of support and opportunities for engagement, as well as making it easier to address multiple needs simultaneously. An evaluation of advice services provided within food banks in the Trussell community found this approach of locating key services in trusted community settings was effective at reaching people who existing services were missing or underserving.³⁴

Provision in trusted community settings could also help to reduce the fear, experienced by many people, that engaging in employment support will lead to strict conditions being placed upon them and the risk of being sanctioned and losing financial support.

The UK government should:

- Devolve employment support programmes to local or strategic authorities who have the best understanding of their labour market, population and specific barriers.

³³ IPS is a voluntary engagement programme that aims to support individuals with severe mental health issues in finding and maintaining employment.

³⁴ Finney, A, Davies, S, Collings, D, Cross, K and Evans, J (2024), *Evaluating the advice and support services provided through food banks*, Personal Finance Research Centre, University of Bristol. <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/evaluation/evaluating-our-money-matters-advice-and-support-services>

- Work with local and strategic authorities to ensure strong integration of employment support programmes and local branches of the new Jobs and Careers Service (previously Jobcentre Plus branches) with wider local support services and programmes, including health and wellbeing, housing, language, debt advice, income maximisation and crisis support services.

Move away from the ‘any job’ approach

Impersonal, one size fits all approaches can push people further from engaging with support and ultimately work. Consistent with the findings from this research, Trussell's 2025 Hunger in the UK research found that people who have needed to use a food bank had often been left feeling disempowered, disrespected, and undervalued by a lack of personalised advice and support, and by being pushed to apply for jobs that do not reflect and recognise their skills, aspirations and constraints. Too often people move into unsuitable, short-term work and cycle back into needing financial support from the social security system. This negatively impacts on people's confidence in themselves and in the support delivered by DWP.

The UK government should:

- Ensure government funded employment support is focused on helping people secure and sustain jobs suited to their circumstances, skills and aspirations. Meaningful and lasting employment outcomes should be prioritised, over rapid transitions into work regardless of suitability.

Redesign mandatory requirements

The threat and use of sanctions, prescriptive work search requirements and focus on monitoring compliance tend to define relationships between work coaches and claimants. This approach creates barriers to positive engagement with employment support and the social security system as a whole. It discourages the formation of trusted relationships where people feel able to share their personal circumstances and challenges and participate in collaborative discussions about realistic steps they could take to move closer to sustainable and rewarding work.

Employment support, including work preparation and job search tasks, should be rooted in the principle of voluntary engagement as a first approach. Conditionality expectations should be broad, and flexible enough to recognise the different pathways towards work people may need to take. Wide-ranging work-related activities should be included in a redesigned claimant commitment that functions as a support plan, rather than prescriptive mandatory requirements. Activities could include volunteering, work experience, and meaningful training and education (accredited or unaccredited) that aligns to an individual's goals.

Employment advisors should monitor the progress achieved through activities that build skills, experience, and employability, and recognise steps towards work such as improved wellbeing, confidence, skills, qualifications, work experience, volunteering and readiness for work, alongside employment entry and sustainment.

Separating out employment support services from Universal Credit's conditionality regime will create more positive environments for people to engage with the support on offer. Examples of this working can be seen in some existing programmes, such as some specialist Youth Hubs where an agreement was made not issue sanctions within the hub and if young people did not engage, they were told they would be referred back to the Jobcentre, who would decide if there was a good reason or not for the lack of engagement before issuing a sanction. This was felt to have created a psychologically safe space for young people, where they were not concerned about the nature of the conversations they were going to have as the advisors in the hubs would not be making any decisions about the use of sanctions.³⁵

Other reports recommend detailed approaches to separating employment support from decisions about sanctions and the processes that could be established to ensure employment support and the social security conditionality regime more closely mirrors the world of work and the adult-to-adult approach taken in most workplaces.³⁶ This would allow for trusted relationships to develop, ensuring people had the time and confidence to disclose any complex personal barriers they are experiencing, which employment advisors could then work to address (or refer on to further specialist support where necessary).

Sanctions should remain as a final accountability backstop, to be used only after the team around an individual have investigated barriers to meeting expectations, offered reasonable adjustments, signposted or referred to specialist support, and exhausted all alternatives. Safeguards should ensure that enforcement of these does not drive people into hardship or dangerous situations.

The UK government should:

- Redesign the claimant commitment as a support plan that includes broad expectations and work-related activity tailored to an individual's circumstances and goals, rather than prescriptive mandatory requirements.
- Prioritise voluntary engagement as a principle of effective employment support and ensure there is a process for identifying barriers to meeting the agreed expectations and using flexibility, easements and reasonable adjustments to support increased engagement.

³⁵ DWP, (2024), *Youth Offer process evaluation*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-offer-process-evaluation/youth-offer-process-evaluation#fn:11>

³⁶ ew Economics Foundation (2023) *From compliance to engagement. Rethinking the use of conditionality in our social security system*, <https://neweconomics.org/2023/08/from-compliance-to-engagement>; Citizens Advice (2025) *The case for case workers. Reimagining the Jobcentre service*, https://assets.ctfassets.net/mfz4nbgura3g/2XMHwtyuvztr9OE5aBp0Ru/aaa7997082e6b9587a17a5d1a125bdc6/The_case_for_caseworkers.pdf

- Ensure employment support relationships and processes embody the adult-to-adult approach taken in most workplaces. For example, a warning system for a consistent lack of engagement or participation without good reason could be adopted, akin to performance plans at work, as set out in detail by both the [New Economics Foundation](#) and [Citizens Advice](#).
- Build trust, and separate people's fear of sanctions from engagement with employment support by ensuring Jobcentre work coaches or other employment support delivery staff work with people on a voluntary basis and are not directly involved in any decisions about sanctions.
- Only use sanctions rarely as a last resort and ensure sufficient safeguards are in place so sanctions do not drive people into hardship or dangerous situations.

Provide adequate social security support

Alongside improved employment support and reformed conditionality, it is important that wider reforms of the social security system ensure it provides adequate levels of financial support to enable people to take up support and opportunities. Providing financial security and preventing longer term economic inactivity are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are closely linked; ensuring people can afford the essentials and can cover the additional costs of disability is crucial for enabling engagement with employment support and breaking down many barriers to work.

There is strong public consensus that Universal Credit's standard allowance should at least cover the cost of life's essentials. However, the absence of any evidence-based assessment of adequacy when setting rates of Universal Credit means levels of support are detached from reality, resulting in large income shortfalls that drive food bank need and undermine reforms aimed at helping people move into and sustain work.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), and Trussell estimate that the amount needed to afford essentials in 2026/27, including food, clothing, vital travel and other household bills, is at least £120 a week for a single adult and £205 for a couple.³⁷ At just £98-a-week for a single person (aged 25 or over), the standard allowance leaves single-adult households facing a shortfall of at least £22 and couples a shortfall of £51. Deductions and caps reduce people's already inadequate Universal Credit payments further and exacerbate hardship for people already struggling to afford the essentials.

The UK government should:

- Protect the UC health element for disabled young people. Restricting young people's eligibility for the UC health element or cutting already inadequate rates of support would cause serious

³⁷ Trussell & Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2026), *Guarantee our Essentials: reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the>

harm to disabled young people and their carers without delivering meaningful fiscal or employment effects.

- Take steps towards embedding an Essentials Guarantee into Universal Credit to ensure all households receive a protected minimum amount of support to afford the essentials, like food and household bills.
- As an immediate, and relatively low-cost initial step towards the Essentials Guarantee, the UK government should introduce a protected minimum floor (PMF) below which Universal Credit's standard allowance is not permitted to fall. This would extend this government's Fair Repayment Rate principle to all deductions, including the benefit cap, creating a legally protected floor at 15% below the current standard allowance.
- Establish an independent process – similar to the Low Pay Commission created for the minimum wage – to advise on the level of support offered by Universal Credit, using evidence of what it costs to cover life's essentials.

Appendices

Appendix A: Rapid evidence review methodology

Rapid evidence review

At the outset of this research, we conducted a rapid evidence review to build a foundational understanding of the current evidence base to ensure our research makes a unique contribution and moves towards actionable, tangible recommendations that build on what we already know.

Research questions

We synthesised evidence relating to three research questions:

1. **Which robust, measurable outcomes are associated with different models of employment support (e.g., employment outcomes, income, health outcomes), beyond self-reported or perceived effectiveness?**
2. **What evidence exists on the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of sanctions and conditionality in improving employment outcomes, including impacts of the threat of sanctions?**
3. **What evidence or proposals demonstrate how to operationalise established principles of effective employment support - such as personalised, relational, holistic, and voluntary engagement - in practical delivery models or pilots?**

Inclusion criteria and sources

Evidence was included if it explored people with complex barriers to work, was UK focused (although relevant international evidence such as robust systematic reviews were to be considered), and was published within the last 10 years. Sources searched included:

- Academic literature through Google scholar
- Grey literature through think tanks and charities that are likely to be doing work in this space, government reports and evaluation reports from employment programmes/pilots
- Policy documents such as white papers, consultations, impact assessments
- Stakeholder consultation through discussions with internal and external policy experts

This led to 102 articles being included in the review, 61 of which were included in a systematic review on work first interventions conducted by IES.³⁸

Appendix B: Sector expert interviews methodology

Sector expert interviews

As part of the initial phases of this research project, we conducted a series of 1:1 semi structured interviews with expert sector partners and organisations involved in delivering employment support. These were conducted remotely via Zoom and lasted approximately 1 hour. Through the interviews we aimed to gather feedback on our research design, as well as gathering practical delivery insights to shape actionable research and identify collaboration opportunities.

Discussion topics

- **Feedback on the research objectives and scope:** Does it feel useful, is this building on what we currently known to move towards specific and actionable recommendations?
- **Gaps in the evidence base:** Any evidence or insight that isn't currently available that would support you in your work or influencing?
- **Research participants:** Any groups of people that are facing complex barriers to work?
- **Influencing impact:** Any key influencing challenges or opportunities we should consider focusing on?

Participants

During the expert interviews, we spoke to the following people.

Name	Role	Organisation
Tom Pollard	Head of Policy, Public Affairs & Campaigns	Mind
Kate Harrison	Senior Policy Researcher	Citizens Advice (CA)
Sam Tims Rachel Casey	Lead Analyst Policy Advisor	Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)
Louise Murphy	Senior Economist	Resolution Foundation (RF)

³⁸ IES, (2026), *Work-first interventions: types and effects*, <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/work-first-interventions-types-and-effects/>

Henry Folkes	Policy & Public Affairs Lead	Employment Related Services Association (ERSA)
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Appendix C: Food bank interviews methodology

Food bank interviews

Building on the insight from the initial scoping phase of the research, semi-structured interviews were then conducted with food banks in the Trussell community who had experience in either directly delivering employment support or facilitating the delivery of external employment support providers within a food bank setting.

Sampling and recruitment

Interviews were conducted with 12 food bank staff working in Trussell food banks across the UK. The following Trussell food banks were interviewed; all interviews were conducted with a member of staff- in most cases a Food Bank Manager.

Sampling aimed to include a representative spread of food banks, considering key factors such as food bank operation size, rurality and geographical location. However, it should be noted that employment support is not currently a core service offered food banks in the Trussell community and as such the initial sample size of food banks offering this service is small at present (around 20-30 locations) and therefore limited sub-sampling.

Food bank	Nation/Region
Abergele	North Wales
Bradford Central	Yorkshire & The Humber
Chelmsford	East of England
Chipping Barnet	Greater London
Clifton, Nottingham	East Midlands
Coventry	West Midlands
Craigavon	Northern Ireland
Epsom & Ewell	South East England

South Liverpool	North West England
East & West Nottingham	East Midlands
Rhondda	South Wales
Truro	South West England

Research questions

Food banks are uniquely positioned within the employment support landscape, and we wanted to ensure we captured their learning and service delivery reflections. We also wanted to explore their experience of supporting people with complex barriers into employment pathways, as well as insights into how employment support can sustainably prevent hardship.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the conversations; with several key topics we aimed to gather insight on:

- Employment support offer and experience of delivery
- Referral pathways, and routes into/out of employment support in their community
- Complex barriers to employment
- Reflections on the features of effective employment support
- Employment support service outcomes
- Reflections on what fair and appropriate conditionality could look like

Appendix D: Policy solution workshop methodology

Policy solution workshops

We commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to work alongside us to deliver a series of 6 sequential online workshops with lived experience experts and staff from food banks in the Trussell community. These workshops utilised participatory and co-design approaches and aimed to answer the four identified research questions. Through two rounds of workshops, lived experience experts shared their experiences of employment support, conditionality and hardship, and worked with food bank staff to develop and refine principles for effective employment support and approaches to mandatory requirements.

In Part 1, three online workshops were delivered with separate groups of young people aged 18-25; carers and single parents; and disabled people and people with long-term health conditions. Separating groups supported psychological safety and enabled discussion of barriers specific to

each population. In Part 2 workshops food bank representatives were invited to take part, alongside experts by experience, enabling reflection on emerging findings and the development of potential solutions.

Defining complex barriers to employment

Through the initial scoping stages of the research, we identified the following 3 groups who experience complex barriers to employment and are disproportionately represented among people experiencing financial insecurity and interacting with the social security system. These groups formed the primary sampling criteria for the workshops.

It is important to note the intersectionality of experience between these groups, which in many cases can increase the complexity of barriers to employment that people face.

1. **Disabled people and people with long term health conditions**
2. **Young people (aged 18-25)**
3. **Carers and single parents**

Sampling and recruitment

A total of 33 lived experience experts comprising of young people (11), carers and single parents (10), and disabled people and people long-term health conditions (12) were recruited to take part in the online workshops. In the second round of workshops food bank staff also took part, with 1-2 staff attending each workshop.

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

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

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

health conditions. Recruitment was monitored to minimise over-representation and ensure that discussions reflected a broad range of experiences and perspectives.

Lived experience experts were recruited through Trussell's networks using a purposive sampling approach designed to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. The sample included participants from a range of backgrounds and circumstances, including different ages, geographical locations and employment situations, all of whom had experience of interacting with the social security system.

Participatory workshop design

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

Activities were designed to maximise engagement and ensure accessibility. These included facilitated discussion, barrier-mapping exercises, fictional scenarios, breakout group work and the use of an interactive digital tool, Mentimeter. Sessions were delivered online via Zoom and incorporated flexible participation options, including verbal contributions, use of the chat function and anonymous digital activities via Mentimeter.

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

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