

FEELING THE

BENEFITS?

# SIGNED ON AND SANCTIONED

An insight into vulnerable young people's  
perspectives on benefit sanctions

**YMCA**  
ENGLAND



## PREFACE

A lot has been said and written about the merits and flaws of the existing welfare system as well as the reforms currently being rolled out across the UK.

However, voices notable in their absence from this debate have been those of the thousands of vulnerable young people that rely on the welfare system in their times of need.

The purpose of this ongoing research series entitled - '***Feeling the Benefits?***' - is to gather vulnerable young people's experiences and viewpoints and give this often unheard and overlooked group a voice on this important issue.

Based on the findings from this research, the YMCA will be publishing a series of reports, each designed around the views expressed by the vulnerable young people.

This report - '***Signed on and Sanctioned***' - is focussed on vulnerable young people's views on benefit sanctions and has been developed to help inform the independent review of Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions led by Matthew Oakley.

## THE YMCA

The YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping over 58 million people in 119 countries.

In England, the YMCA are the largest voluntary sector provider of supported accommodation for young people, and the largest voluntary sector provider of activities and services that promote health and well-being.

There are 114 YMCAs in England, helping to transform over 530 different communities so that all young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

The YMCA strives to create inspiring environments where young people can develop confidence to choose their own path in life, find fulfilment and determine their own future.

## THE RESEARCH

To gather the views of vulnerable young people, a range of research methods were employed.

A survey of vulnerable young people accessing YMCA programmes and services, as well as staff and volunteers working at YMCAs, was conducted between November and December 2013. A total of 59 vulnerable young people took part in the survey, along with 34 staff and volunteers. Those participating in the survey came from across 22 different YMCAs. The questions in the survey focussed on the awareness, impact as well as their perspectives on sanctions.

The quantitative evidence from the survey is also supplemented by more qualitative information drawn from a series of detailed interviews with vulnerable young people living in YMCAs. These interviews took place between August and September 2013 with residents at three YMCAs in the North West of England; Blackburn, Crewe and St Helens.

A total of 12 detailed interviews were carried out, during which the vulnerable young people were asked questions that focussed on the following areas; their background, their education and training, housing, employment, their current benefits and the planned changes to the welfare system.

The vulnerable young people interviewed were selected by the YMCAs and were all between 18-24 years old, living in supported housing and accessing benefits. Detailed interviews were also conducted with the key workers responsible for supporting these vulnerable young people at the YMCAs.

# INTRODUCTION

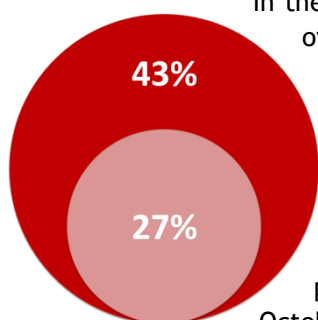
## *New sanction rules*

From October 2012, for those people not doing what is set out in their Claimant Commitment, new sanction rules for Jobseeker's Allowance were introduced, which included:

- Three tiers of sanction depending on the nature of the offence - which mean individuals can receive 'higher', 'intermediate' and lower' level sanctions
- Different levels of sanctions for first, second and third offences - which could mean cutting an individual's benefit payments from 1 week up to 156 weeks
- Changes to the date a sanction starts - which mean cuts to an individual's benefit payments occur more immediately following an offence

## *The impact of the reforms*

In the first seven months following the introduction of the reforms, over ¼ million young people were sanctioned, which is equivalent to over 30,000 each month and nearly 1,000 every day.



The evidence released to date suggests that Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions are disproportionately affecting young people. While only making up around 27% of claimants, young people accounted for 43% of all the sanctions issued since October 2012.

This disproportionate impact that sanctions are having has also been seen amongst the vulnerable young people the YMCA supports. Nearly all (94%) the YMCAs responding to the research reported an increase in the number of vulnerable young people they work with being sanctioned since October 2012, with just under two thirds (61%) indicating that they felt the increase had been significant.

The impact that this increase in sanctions has had on vulnerable young people has been substantial. Not only does being sanctioned affect them financially, there is also a human cost, detrimentally affecting vulnerable young people's physical and mental wellbeing.

A significant majority (86%) of those vulnerable young people who had been sanctioned reported being forced to go without essential items during the period when their benefits were cut. The most common areas where they were forced to cut back or go without were food (84%), housing costs (81%) and toiletries (75%).

*“I didn’t cope, I had no-one”*

*“It’s how long they left me with no money knowing I was pregnant and had to buy my own food”*

*“I was unable to eat and it was lucky they (the YMCA) could help”*

*“You have a much more negative attitude to life as a whole”*

*“It lost me my home and food”*

*“I had to borrow money just to make ends meet”*

*“I went three months living on food parcels...which is really degrading because you lose all your dignity. It’s not just physically hard, it’s mentally hard.”*

In addition to this, many of the vulnerable young people taking part in the research felt that having their benefits sanctioned placed them in a vicious cycle which actually hindered their transition into work and getting off benefits.

*“I was unable to look for work as much as I could before”*

*“It stopped me from searching for work as I had no money to get to different employers”*

*“My focus turned to survival, rather than gaining employment”*

Despite the substantial increase and the impact witnessed since October 2012, there was a recognition amongst many vulnerable young people for the need for some form of sanctions for those not doing what is being required of them within the welfare system. Over two thirds (68%) of the vulnerable young people taking part in the research said that they agreed with the need for some form of sanctions or penalties for people not doing what is being required by Jobcentre Plus.

*“You can’t get something for nothing”*

*“I think sanctions are appropriate because it stops people falsely claiming any benefits when they’re not meeting the right needs”*

*“There are people who do not seek work but claim benefits”*

*“People not doing their job search obviously don’t care, so they deserve to be sanctioned unless there is a good reason”*

*“People need to earn their benefits”*

*“People shouldn’t get paid for doing nothing, when some people are genuinely doing everything they can to get a job”*

This figure is even higher amongst staff and volunteers working at YMCAs, with 85% of those responding agreeing with the need for some form of sanctions or penalties within the welfare system.

In line with this general recognition of the need for sanctions, the majority (77%) of vulnerable young people questioned felt that some form of sanction acted as a motivation to do what is being required by Jobcentre Plus.

*“I understand that I have to look for work to reduce the risk of further and lengthier sanctions”*

*“Sanctions motivate me to meet my requirements because I would rather not have to live on nothing”*

*“I wouldn't like to be in a position of having nothing”*

*“Sanctions would motivate me”*

*“It does make you think twice”*

*“If appointments are missed and there is no reason for it, people should realise they will get no money. Therefore, if they want to receive money, they should be motivated”*

However this belief was not universal. For some, they felt that sanctions only act to further demotivate and marginalise those vulnerable young people who are already suffering most.

*“I don't believe a sanction is there to motivate, it's just there to scare you”*

*“I'd do what is required from me by the Jobcentre regardless of whether sanctions were in effect or not”*

*“Obviously something should be done if you don't do what you should do, but how do you expect people to survive with nothing”*

*“How do the Government expect someone to survive on their own when they have no family or friends to help them out?”*

*“There is a difference between a consequence and a punishment”*

*“I don't think they will motivate people. I think it will just annoy people and make them angry with the Jobcentre”*



Where there was a greater consensus is with the way they feel sanctions are currently being administered. Over three quarters (77%) of the vulnerable young people questioned felt that the way that sanctions are currently being applied was not fair. A view reinforced by the substantial majority (73%) of these working for the YMCA.

The concerns raised with the current sanctions regime focussed around the communication, and the policies and processes of Jobcentre Plus and work programme providers.

# COMMUNICATION

## *Introduction*

The majority (59%) of the vulnerable young people questioned indicated that they were aware that they could be sanctioned. This was reinforced by staff and volunteers working within YMCAs, with just under three quarters (71%) of those questioned believing that the vulnerable young people they work with were suitably informed that they can be sanctioned.

However, whilst the majority of the vulnerable young people questioned were aware they could be sanctioned, communication from Jobcentre Plus and work programme providers are currently failing vulnerable young people on three fronts:

- Not providing them with adequate support on how they can avoid being sanctioned
- Not explaining why they have been sanctioned
- Not giving them practical advice and support on what they can do once they have been sanctioned

## *Not providing claimants with adequate support on how they can avoid being sanctioned*

Only just under a third (32%) of staff and volunteers working at YMCAs felt that the vulnerable young people they work with were suitably informed about what they could be sanctioned for.

The current failure by Jobcentre Plus to communicate an individual's Claimant Commitment and the implications of not meeting this, is effectively denying many vulnerable young people a fighting chance of avoiding being sanctioned. This is demonstrated by nearly two thirds (63%) of those vulnerable young people indicating that they need more information, recommending that this should focus on how they avoid being sanctioned.

As well as failing to effectively communicate the expectations on a claimant leading to sanctions, the research found that ongoing communication between claimants and Jobcentre Plus also contributed to many vulnerable young people being sanctioned.

“My advisor appointment letter got sent to the wrong address after I'd already changed my address”

“Due to a change of address, I did not receive letters telling me about my appointments”

“I hadn't received a letter telling me about the appointments”

“I sent proof I was at college twice”

Such errors were reported as becoming an even greater problem where claimants were referred by Jobcentre Plus to work programme providers.

*“Work programme providers assure you that a missed appointment is fine, but it causes sanction”*

*“I called to say that I wasn't going to make my meeting and I was sanctioned anyway”*

*“I did go down there the next day and explained it to my advisor and she said that my money shouldn't be affected, but it was”*

*“Jobcentre sanctioned me for missing an appointment at my work programme provider that I did not know about”*

In response to the communication failings identified, the staff and volunteers working at YMCAs are having to spend much more time attempting to keep the vulnerable young people they work with in benefits.

As well as ongoing advice they provide through regular support meetings, staff and volunteers at YMCAs have begun taking a range of preventative measures which include; keeping track of dates their residents are required to sign on, supporting them with job search activity and working more closely with local Jobcentre Plus and other agencies such as the Citizen's Advice Bureau.



Also in response to the communication shortcomings identified, in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions, the YMCA has also begun producing and circulating guides relating to the welfare system targeted at young people. This includes a [guide](#) specifically on sanctions that sets out:

- What a sanction is
- What they can get sanctioned for
- How long a sanction can last
- What they can do to avoid being sanctioned
- What they can do if they are sanctioned

However, as the research demonstrates, much more needs to be done to ensure that vulnerable young people are not disproportionately punished by sanctions due to poor communication by Jobcentre Plus and work programme providers, as is currently the situation.

To do this, Jobcentre Plus and work programme providers need to provide an approach based around the individual and be more proactive in both tailoring the language and delivery methods to the range of clients they work with.

What is evident from the research is that Jobcentre Plus should be doing more at the outset to communicate the requirements of the Claimant Commitment and what practical steps individuals could be taking to look for and prepare themselves for employment. As the research demonstrates, it is a lack of understanding in this area which is leading to many vulnerable young people being sanctioned.

In doing this, the Government and work programme providers need to work with organisations such as the YMCA to ensure that the materials they produce are clear and understandable to different client groups and to deliver more outreach workshops and forums targeted at those groups most likely to be affected by sanctions, such as vulnerable young people.

**1** The YMCA proposes that the Government should work with relevant service providers to ensure that key information relating to the welfare system is better tailored and communicated to young people.

To support this, Jobcentre Plus should also introduce a genuine single point of contact for claimants throughout the lifespan of their claim, which goes beyond the previous advisor role and should apply even when referred to a work programme provider.

As well as being available to the claimant at local Jobcentre Plus, they should be accessible to the claimant by email and phone. So for issues such as not being able to attend a meeting, the claimants are clear on whom they should go to and have the means to do this.

This would avoid the current situation where individuals are given inconsistent advice, are having to provide the same information to multiple individuals and organisations, and would also help overcome the growing distrust many vulnerable young people have towards Jobcentre Plus.

**2** The YMCA proposes that claimants should have an individual as a single point of contact within their local Jobcentre Plus, who they can go to, email or call, regarding any inquiries or issues regarding their claim and this should remain consistent even when the claimant is referred to other organisations as part of any mandatory work activity.

#### ***Not explaining why claimants have been sanctioned***

The communication failings were also evident in how claimants are being notified that they have been sanctioned. Less than half (41%) of the staff and volunteers questioned felt that the vulnerable young people they work with were suitably informed why they had been sanctioned.

For the vast majority (72%) of the vulnerable young people who had been sanctioned, they were informed by letter. Given the letters claimants receive are non-specific and often based on a standard template, the actual reason is understandably often difficult to decipher, particularly for more vulnerable individuals.

In additions to this, a number of the vulnerable young people taking part in the research reported not having been informed at all that they had been sanctioned. When asked how they were informed that they had been sanctioned, the following responses were received.

*“I wasn't informed, all I did was go to my bank and found out that my money wasn't in the bank”*

*“When I checked my bank balance”*

*“The bank”*

*“They didn't tell me I was going to be sanctioned, all they did was not give me my money, so I then had to go down there (the Jobcentre Plus) and find out what was happening”*

*“I was not told about the sanction until a week later”*

These views expressed by the vulnerable young people were supported by the staff and volunteers contributing to the research.

*“Young people are not being informed of sanctions until after they have realised that their benefit payments have not gone into their bank account, sometimes it is the week after until the letter arrives”*

*“We have experienced some instances of sanctioning without warning which is particularly harsh”*

*“It is very difficult for young people to get the correct information from DWP regarding details of the sanction and why it has been imposed. As a worker, I have also found it difficult to get this information”*

Given the impact that taking away an individual's main source of income can have, by denying them the opportunity to have the reasons for the sanction explained to them before having their benefits removed, the current arrangements are simply acerbating the problems being faced by vulnerable young people.

Not informing an individual that they have been sanctioned is even more unnecessary given that people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance attend appointments at their local Jobcentre Plus at least every two weeks.

To address this issue, as well as providing a revised letter better detailing the specific reasons why an individual has been sanctioned, this should be followed up with a more detailed explanation at their next appointment at Jobcentre Plus. Adopting this approach, as well as ensuring that claimants understand fully the reasons why they were being sanctioned, would also help to make sure that they are aware of the options then available to them, both in appealing the sanction and accessing support.

**3** The YMCA proposes that a duty be placed on Jobcentre Plus to provide people being sanctioned with a clear explanation of the reasons why this is being imposed, both in writing and face-to-face at their next appointment, prior to removing any benefit payments.

***Not giving claimants practical advice and support on what they can do once they have been sanctioned***

Following a sanction being issued, the vulnerable young people taking part in the research were broadly aware that they could appeal a sanction (85%) and that some support was available to them during the period of the sanction (58%).

However, less than a fifth of the staff and volunteers questioned felt that the vulnerable young people they work with were suitably informed on the practical steps they could take to appeal a sanction (18%) and access support available to them (15%).

This was supported by the evidence coming from the vulnerable young people questioned. Of those vulnerable young people indicating that they need more information on sanctions, over four fifths (81%) said they wanted more information on what they can do if they are sanctioned.

This failure to communicate the practical steps that vulnerable young people can take to challenge sanctions and access support, means that they are being forced to accept unjust decisions made and go without what support is available to them, making the impact of sanctions on this group much more severe.

In response to this issue, when a vulnerable young person is sanctioned YMCAs are working to ensure they maintain their Housing Benefit claim by submitting Nil-Income applications, supporting them through the appeals process, and making sure they access the support available to them, including Hardship Payments and food parcels.

As set in the first two recommendations focussed on ensuring claimants have adequate support on how they can avoid being sanctioned, Jobcentre Plus need to provide an approach based around the individual and work more closely with organisations such as the YMCA to ensure those most vulnerable groups are adequately supported when a decision to sanction them is taken.

## POLICIES AND PROCESSES

### *Introduction*

In addition to the concerns identified with communication, the vulnerable young people along with the staff and volunteers taking part in the research raised a significant number of issues with the policies and processes of Jobcentre Plus and work programme providers.

These issues were focussed around the following areas:

- The protection of vulnerable claimants
- The notice given to claimants before a sanction is imposed
- The process for appealing sanctions
- The length and form of sanctions imposed

### *The protection of vulnerable claimants*

Linked to the need for Jobcentre Plus and work programme providers to more effectively build their approach around individual claimants, those taking part in the research felt much more could be done to ensure that those most vulnerable people do not continue to be disproportionately impacted by sanctions.

This needs to begin from the outset of an individual's claim when setting the expectations placed upon them in looking for and preparing themselves for work. Many of the vulnerable young people questioned felt that the expectations placed upon them, both due to their background and current situation, were unrealistic and setting them up to fail.

*"I don't feel my circumstances as a vulnerable homeless person are taken into consideration. The rules are applied regardless of personal circumstances"*

This was a view supported by the staff and volunteers participating in the research.

*"Often it is not a fair process as circumstances are not taken into consideration"*

*"I find that sanctions are given too generically and the circumstances behind why the young person has not complied are not taken into account, as well as the ability of the person"*

*"The sanctions are applied to all people irrespective of personal situation and need, which is equal but not fair. Young people, those with learning disabilities and those with chaotic lifestyles are further distanced from support by the introduction of sanctions when they are struggling with the benefits system"*

Without changes to the policies and processes of Jobcentre Plus and work programme providers so that they are better able to adapt around an individual's needs and circumstances, the current sanctions regime will continue to punish those most vulnerable in society.

An example is claimants who are homeless or living in emergency accommodation such as Nightstops, temporary hostels or bed and breakfasts. Their priority should be finding stable accommodation, subjecting them to the same conditionality as other claimants is failing to recognise this and greatly increasing the prospect of them being sanctioned due to circumstances beyond control.

**4** The YMCA proposes that claimants who are homeless or in emergency accommodation be exempt from the same job search conditionality and the potential of being sanctioned until they have found stable accommodation.

As well as this, where claimants are living in supported accommodation such as that provided by the YMCA, processes should be introduced where information provided to the claimant, including the details of their claim and any sanctions should also be supplied to the supported housing provider. By taking this approach it would allow organisations such as the YMCA to better support those in most need.

**5** The YMCA proposes that where claimants are living in supported accommodation, as well as providing them with the details of their claim and any sanctions, Jobcentre Plus should also be required to supply this information to the supported housing provider.

***The notice given to claimants before a sanction is imposed***

Linked to the concerns raised in the previous section regarding how individuals are currently being informed that they had been sanctioned, a number of the vulnerable young people taking part in the research indicated the need for notice to be reintroduced prior to a sanction being issued.

*“Warning should be given first”*

*“People should be given a chance to explain why they have not done what is asked of them, sometimes but not always, there may be a good reason”*

*“There should be more investigation before a sanction”*

*“If they are going to sanction someone, they should give them one payment with advance notice and make them aware that they are being sanctioned so people can plan ahead”*



Building in a notice period offers a number of advantages. It would help avoid the situation where those being sanctioned are not granted the opportunity to have the reason fully explained to them, giving time for letters to arrive and advisors to set this out clearly during their next visit.

Having a notice period would also give claimants an opportunity to put forward their case and have the decision reconsidered prior to having their benefit payments stopped, avoiding the 'guilty until proved innocent' approach currently being taken by Jobcentre Plus.

In addition to this, a notice period would allow the chance for claimants to prepare for a period of being without Jobseeker's Allowance payments. Given that a significant number of the vulnerable young people the YMCA work with live 'hand to mouth', means having their benefits removed with immediate effect can have a more devastating impact. As outlined earlier in this report, under the current arrangements this frequently results in many vulnerable young people not having enough money for essentials such as food and toiletries.

As well as this, under the existing arrangements, claimants having their Jobseeker's Allowance sanctioned automatically results in their Housing Benefit claim being stopped. So in addition to being without Jobseeker's Allowance payments, being sanctioned can often result in an individual experiencing breaks in receiving their Housing Benefit and being unable to meet their housing costs. In the worst cases, this can result in individuals becoming homeless.

A notice period would give individuals who are also in receipt of Housing Benefit the opportunity to submit Nil-Income applications to their local authority to avoid the knock on situation where their support for housing costs are also stopped and the punishment from being sanctioned is multiplied.

**6** The YMCA proposes that a duty be placed on Jobcentre Plus to provide people being sanctioned with a suitable notice period and an opportunity to have the decision reconsidered prior to removing any benefit payments.

#### ***The process for appealing sanctions***

As outlined in the previous section of this report, while the vast majority of the vulnerable young people recognised that they were able to challenge sanctions they considered to be unfair, many found it problematic. As well as this being due to a failing in communication, the appeals process itself was also raised by those vulnerable young people taking part in the research as being an issue.

Less than a fifth (19%) of those who had challenged their sanction said they found the process straightforward and easy, with the remaining vulnerable young people suggesting that challenging their sanction was either moderate (50%) or difficult (31%) to do. Of those that did challenge their sanction, only just over half (58%) felt that they received support to do this and in the majority of these cases (80%), this support came from the YMCA.

*“I think that the appeals should be dealt with more efficiently”*

*I felt that I didn't get much help from the Jobcentre to help me sort it out and I never heard anything about my appeal”*

*Jobcentre sanctioned me for missing an appointment I didn't know about...but I figured even if I appealed, it wouldn't have changed anything”*

The views expressed by the vulnerable young people, were supported by the staff and volunteers taking part in the research.

*“The appeals process is very long and complicated”*

*“Whilst appealing against some decisions, some residents have been without income for several weeks”*

*“They are told about the appeals process, but often the process is so long and difficult for them”*

*“Sanction reviews and appeals should be a much quicker process”*

These findings suggest shortcomings in both the process of appealing a sanction as well as the support provided by Jobcentre Plus to help vulnerable claimants who feel they have been unjustly penalised. The importance of being able to challenge a sanction is demonstrated by the number of those responding who were successful in their attempts to overturn a sanction. Of those vulnerable young people who challenged their sanction, over half (55%) were successful.

Without the support which is currently being provided by organisations such as the YMCA to guide vulnerable young people through the complex and timely appeals process, many would find it even more difficult and be forced to accept sanctions even if they believed it to be unfair.

As proposed, if a notice period was to be introduced, this would provide claimants with an initial opportunity have the sanction reconsidered and help overcome areas of miscommunication or misunderstanding prior to stopping an individual's benefit payments.

Alongside providing claimants with this opportunity, the overall process for then appealing a sanction needs to be reviewed to make it simpler and more efficient for claimants, with incentives introduced for staff working in Jobcentre Plus to support claimants and penalties for those who frequently have their sanction decisions overturned.

**7** The YMCA proposes that Jobcentre Plus should reform the sanctions appeals process to make it simpler and more efficient for claimants.

### ***The length and form of sanctions imposed***

Another area where those taking part in the research felt that the policies and processes of Jobcentre Plus needed reform was in the current length and form of sanctions.

As outlined previously in this report, while there is recognition for the need for some form of sanctions for those exploiting the welfare system, nearly three quarters (74%) of the vulnerable young people taking part in the research felt the current length of sanctions was too long. A view supported by the staff and volunteers working at YMCAs, of which just over three quarters (76%) felt that sanctions were currently too long.

Also, when asked how the existing sanctions regime should be changed, the length was an issue commonly raised by the vulnerable young people responding.

*“I agree with sanctions, but not with the length of the sanctions, they’re too long”*

*“They should be shortened”*

*“They take your money off you for too long”*

*“Sanctions should be made shorter”*

*“They should not be as long”*

As well as the current length of sanctions, a number of vulnerable young people participating in the research felt the form of sanctions used by Jobcentre Plus should be reviewed.

*“Stop sanctioning people and just make them do unpaid work”*

*“Instead of stopping money, do training”*

*“Instead of stopping paying us, make us work”*

When asked which potential form of sanction they thought would best motivate them to do what is being required by Jobcentre Plus, the respondents were split. Just under half felt that being forced to do either unpaid work (49%) or training (47%) would be a more appropriate form of sanction, while 38% felt the current arrangement of removing their benefit payments was more appropriate.

The staff and volunteers working at YMCAs were also split on what they thought would be the most appropriate form of sanction to use. With 42% suggesting unpaid work, 32% training and 26% removing benefit payments. Alternative suggestions were also put forward for those not meeting the requirements set down, including a reduction in benefit payments rather than removing them all together and more frequent sign-on meetings.

While it is recognised that the length and form of sanctions imposed is outside of the scope of the existing independent review of sanctions, if the Government are serious about addressing the current problems leading to and resulting from sanctions as well supporting more people into employment and training, these issues require consideration.

**8** The YMCA proposes that a more comprehensive review of all sanctions should be undertaken to fully address the existing problems leading to and resulting from their implementation.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nearly all the YMCAs taking part in this research reported seeing an increase in the number of sanctions being issued to the vulnerable young people they work with since the reforms were introduced in October 2012. The disproportionate impact that sanctions are currently having on young people is clear.

Whilst there is recognition amongst YMCAs and the vulnerable young people they work with for the need for some form of sanctions, the research raises some serious concerns, with vulnerable young people as well as staff and volunteers surveyed believing that the way that sanctions are currently being applied is unfair. As with the other failings within the current welfare system, at the heart of the problems being experienced with sanctions are poor communication and processes.

As the findings demonstrate, while the majority of the vulnerable young people that the YMCA works with are aware that they can potentially be sanctioned, Jobcentre Plus and the Government are failing to communicate many aspects around sanctions.

Given the impact that taking away an individual's main source of income can have, not only financially but also on their physical and mental health, by failing to effectively communicate how they can avoid being sanctioned, why they have been sanctioned and what they can do once they have been sanctioned, the current arrangements are simply punishing vulnerable young people.

In addition to the concerns identified with communication, the vulnerable young people along with the staff and volunteers taking part in the research raised a significant number of issues with the policies and processes of Jobcentre Plus and work programme providers, which are failing to protect vulnerable claimants.

To help rectify the current situation where those most vulnerable people are being disproportionately punished by sanctions, Jobcentre Plus and work programme providers need to provide an approach based around the individual, being more proactive in how they communicate to young people and put in place safeguards for those in most need.

In establishing the independent review of sanctions, the YMCA had hoped the Government were serious about addressing the current problems leading to and resulting from sanctions. However, due to its limited scope, the review is focusing on the symptom rather than the cause of a system that is currently failing vulnerable young people.

Based on the findings from the research, a series of recommendations are set out below for how sanctions could be improved.

- 1** The YMCA proposes that the Government should work with relevant service providers to ensure that key information relating to the welfare system is better tailored and communicated to young people.
- 2** The YMCA proposes that claimants should have a single point of contact within their local Jobcentre Plus, who they can go to, email or call; regarding any inquiries or issues regarding their claim and this should remain consistent even when the claimant is referred to other organisations as part of any mandatory work activity.
- 3** The YMCA proposes that a duty be placed on Jobcentre Plus to provide people being sanctioned with a clear explanation of the reasons why this is being imposed, both in writing and face-to-face at their next appointment, prior to a prior to removing any benefit payments.
- 4** The YMCA proposes that claimants who are homeless or in emergency accommodation be exempt from the same job search conditionality and the potential of being sanctioned until they have found stable accommodation.
- 5** The YMCA proposes that where claimants are in living in supported accommodation, as well as providing them with the details of their claim and any sanctions, Jobcentre Plus should also be required to supply this information to the supported housing provider.
- 6** The YMCA proposes that a duty be place on Jobcentre Plus to provide people being sanctioned with a suitable notice period and an opportunity to have the decision reconsidered prior to removing any benefit payments.
- 7** The YMCA proposes that Jobcentre Plus should reform the sanctions appeals process to make it simpler and more efficient for claimants.
- 8** The YMCA proposes that a more comprehensive review of all sanctions should be undertaken to fully address the existing problems leading to and resulting from their implementation.





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