

**YMCA England's response to  
the Work and Pensions  
Committee inquiry into  
'benefit sanctions policy  
beyond the Oakley Review'**

**December 2014**

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1** YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping over 58 million people in 119 countries. Here in England where it all began, 114 YMCAs work to transform over 530 different communities, impacting on the lives of nearly 600,000 people every year.
- 1.2** For YMCA and the young people we work with, there is recognition of the need for conditionality within the social security system. Over two thirds (68%) of those young people we surveyed earlier in the year accepted the need for some form of sanctions for those individuals taking advantage of the system.<sup>i</sup>
- 1.3** However, the devastating impact that the current sanctions regime is having cannot continue to be ignored. Every two minutes a young person somewhere in the UK is having their benefits stopped or cut by a job centre. Far from it being a '*tiny minority of cases*' affected,<sup>ii</sup> 594,192 young people (aged 18-24) have been the recipients of adverse sanctions since October 2012.<sup>iii</sup>
- 1.4** The proportion of young people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance that have been sanctioned has more than doubled, from around 2% under the previous arrangements to 5% of claimants since October 2012.<sup>iv</sup>
- 1.5** The disproportionate way in which sanctions are currently being imposed on young people is evidenced by them making up only around 26% of jobseekers, yet having felt the impact of 41% of the adverse sanctions imposed since the new regime was introduced.<sup>v</sup>
- 1.6** This has not gone unnoticed amongst young people, while there was support amongst those we surveyed for the need for conditionality within the social security system, over three quarters (77%) of those questioned felt that the way sanctions are currently being imposed is unfair.<sup>vi</sup>

## **2. How is the system failing young people?**

- 2.1** At the heart of the problems being experienced by young people with the current sanctions regime are poor communications and processes that fail to adequately identify and support those in most need.
- 2.2** These problems start and often stem from young people's very first meetings with a Work Coach. A failure to adequately explain the expectations being placed on claimants at the outset of their claim leaves young people unexperienced in how the social security system works exposed to falling short of the requirements set.
- 2.3** Our research suggests that the majority (59%) of young people know they can have their benefits stopped or cut if they fail to meet the requirements set.<sup>vii</sup> However, what they felt they lacked was access to support and information on what they can do to avoid this becoming a reality.

*"People who haven't claimed before struggle to understand"*

Mat 20, Southend YMCA

- 2.4** This failure to provide adequate this information upfront is a key reason why YMCAs see the large proportion of the sanctions being issued in the first few months of an individual's claim, with young people being forced to 'learn the hard way'.
- 2.5** For the most vulnerable individuals in the UK the situation can be even worse. In addition to not having the requirements clearly explained from the outset of their claims, many are being set up to fail through ineffective upfront assessments.
- 2.6** Too often YMCA is seeing job centres failing to invest time when claims are first submitted to understand the often complex circumstances and barriers vulnerable young people face in finding sustained employment, meaning the expectation set for them can be unrealistic or unsuitable.
- 2.7** This is particularly the case for the nearly ten thousand young people accessing our hostels and homelessness services each night, whose circumstances are often overlooked in designing their Claimant Commitment.

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

Lee 27, Humber YMCA

- 2.8** The communication failings that are leading to an increasing number of young people being sanctioned go beyond their initial contacts with job centres and extend throughout the length of their claim.

- 2.9** YMCA frequently witness issues with ongoing communications between job centres and young people leading to sanctions being issued. Most commonly this is miscommunications in the setting of appointments and in job centre or work programme placements.

*"I was visiting my friend who was in hospital with terminal cancer. I called to say that I wasn't going to make my meeting and I was sanctioned anyway"*

Leigh 21, YMCA Bedfordshire

- 2.10** The failings in this area go as far as not providing a clear reason why a sanction has been imposed or that it has been imposed at all, leaving many young people to find out when they next go to 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 job centre) and find out what was happening"*

Daniel 20, Southend YMCA

- 2.11** This denies young people the opportunity to have the reasons for the sanction explained to them and for them to challenge unjust decisions prior to their benefits being cut or stopped. Of the young people YMCA surveyed, over four fifths (81%) indicated they felt they needed more information on what they can do if they are sanctioned.<sup>viii</sup>

- 2.12** As the statistics released by the Government show, where a decision is challenged there is a good chance that a decision will be overturned. Nearly half (44%) of the 128,840 reconsiderations and appeals made by young people led to no sanction being applied.<sup>ix</sup>

- 2.13** The failure to communicate this not only hinders their ability to challenge unfair sanctions, but also means they are forced to go without support which potentially available to them making the impact of any sanctions more severe.

*"I felt that I didn't get much help form the job centre to help me sort it out and I never heard anything about my appeal"*

Kirsty 24, the Y Leicester

- 2.14** In addition to these poor communications and processes, since October 2012 YMCA has seen a notable shift in the balance of the social security system that has left the most vulnerable claimants further subjected to having their benefits stopped or cut with damaging consequences.

- 2.15** The increasing drive from the Government to penalise those not doing what is expected has resulting in the balance within the social security system to become skewed towards process and punishment rather than supporting claimants back into work.
- 2.16** This shift in balance and focus is demonstrated by the reasons why young people being sanctioned, with the vast majority of having their benefits stopped or cut for what are largely minor infringements.
- 2.17** The three main reasons why young people are being sanctioned under the new regime are: -
- ▶ Not actively seeking employment – 29% (174,764 adverse sanctions)
  - ▶ Failing to participate in the Work Programme – 28% (165,610 adverse sanctions)
  - ▶ Failing to attend an advisor interview – 26% (151,503 adverse sanctions)<sup>x</sup>
- 2.18** As a proportion of the sanctions issued, the most substantial change that has occurred since October 2012 has been with young claimants not fulfilling the work search requirements set down by their job centre. Prior to October 2012, this accounted for 10% of the sanctions issued against young people, since the new regime was introduced this has increased to 29%.<sup>xi</sup>
- 2.19** This shift has had a significant impact on the attitudes towards the job centre amongst young people. Far from being somewhere they can go to receive the advice and support, job centres are actually seen by many young people as simply a place for processing and punishing.

*"Sometimes you can get someone who will try to help you out, but nine times of ten you get someone who just doesn't care"*

Ian 21, Blackburn YMCA

*"They don't really help you, they just tell you need that you need to find a job"*

Anthony 21, St Helens YMCA

### 3. What is the impact has this had on young people?

- 3.1** YMCA works with vulnerable young people including care leavers, young people who have become estranged from their parents, young people who have been sleeping rough on the street or sofa surfing, those who have faced abuse at home, and those who have relationship breakdowns with partners or other members of their family.
- 3.2** For these young people, budgeting struggles and living hand-to-mouth are an everyday reality and any cuts or delays to the benefits they receive can mean the difference between being able to afford to eat or not.
- 3.3** YMCA found when young people were sanctioned it was essential items like food (84%), housing costs (81%) and toiletries (75%) that were forced to cut back on or go without.<sup>xii</sup>

*"It was how long they left me with no money knowing I was pregnant and had to buy me own food"*

Natasha 21, Crewe YMCA

*"I was on the verge of being evicted for not being able to pay my rent"*

Emma 23, YMCA Southampton

*"I could not manage I had no money to buy essential items like toiletries"*

Joe 20, North Staffordshire YMCA

- 3.4** The hardship being faced by young people as a direct result of having their benefits cut or stopped is further demonstrated by the significant numbers YMCA are now referring to food banks.
- 3.5** YMCA now refer around 5,000 young people a year to food banks and just under four in five (79%) of those being referred were as a direct result of them having their benefits sanctioned. In addition to this, YMCA directly provided over 1,800 people with food parcels last year.<sup>xiii</sup>

*"I went three months living on food parcels from the local mosques and the church, which is really downgrading because you lose all your dignity"*

Joshua 21, Blackburn YMCA

- 3.6** However, the impact is not just financial, YMCA have witnessed how being sanctioned can affect a young people's physical and mental health.

*"I didn't cope, I had no-one"*

Claire 22, St Helens YMCA

*"It left me feeling helpless with no way to support myself"*

Stacey 23, the Y Leicester

- 3.7** Through research undertaken by YMCA, we have found the evidence to be mixed on whether to current sanctions regime actually motivates young people to find employment, with many reporting it had the opposite effect.

*"My focus turned to survival, rather than gaining employment"*

Nicholas 22, Colchester YMCA

*"This isn't going to help you look for work because you're not eating well, you can't wash without any toiletries and no-one can go for interview if unclean and hungry, it just doesn't work."*

Jason 24, St Helens YMCA

- 3.8** In addition to the impact on young people, the increased levels of benefit sanctions are also having a significant effect on the support services organisations like YMCA are able to provide.
- 3.9** In response to the role the social security system is having on young people, support workers with YMCA are spending more and more time attempting to set up and maintain their benefit claims.
- 3.10** As well as ongoing advice they provide through regular support meetings, staff and volunteers at YMCAs have begun implementing a range of preventative measures to help young people maintain their claims. These include keeping track of dates they are required to sign on, supporting them with job search activity, submitting nil-income Housing Benefit applications, and producing guides relating to the social security system.<sup>xiv</sup>

#### **4. What needs to be done to address this situation?**

- 4.1** The social security system was set up to protect and provide a safety net for those individuals in their time of need. However, poor communications and a lack of flexibility in the current policies and practices make the social security system unable to respond to individuals' circumstances and is leaving many young people exposed to being unjustly sanctioned and in some cases causing them to disengage entirely.
- 4.2** Urgent action needs to be taken to address these problems and YMCA believes this should focus on:
- ▶ Developing a more person-centred social security system
  - ▶ Undertaking a comprehensive review of benefit sanctions
- 4.3 **Developing a more person-centred social security system****  
As set out in this response and recognised by the Oakley review, action to improve communications within the social security system was vital.
- 4.4** YMCA welcomes the actions that have been taken in this area and where possible we are working closely with the Department of Work and Pensions in helping to test the new materials and letters being produced. While this work to address the written communications produced appears to be making significant progress, the biggest communication challenge lies in the face of the social security system – job centres.
- 4.5** For many young people in order for them to make that important transition to independence and employment, they first need people around them on which they can depend. Becoming someone who young people can depend upon requires an investment of time, something which the inflexibilities within the current social security system inhibit.
- 4.6** To overcome this fundamental lack of confidence and failings, job centres should be enabled and encouraged to invest more time upfront in understanding the often complex barriers that young people face in finding sustained employment.
- 4.7** Having identified these, job centres should have greater flexibility to develop and commission more tailored support which can encompass a wider range of training and work experience opportunities, including being able to place individuals on training for longer than 16 hours a week.
- 4.8** In doing this those working within Jobcentre Plus should be encouraged to develop closer working relationships with representatives from other organisations, particularly those already working closely with vulnerable individuals.
- 4.9** As well as helping to personalise the support provided, improving links with other relevant organisations would help to better understand the barriers faced by claimants and keep check on the progress they are making.



- 4.10** To ensure these relationships and communications continue throughout the length of their claim and to avoid the delays and breaks resulting in young people being unable to speak with someone who knows about them and their claim or being bounced between different departments, it is important that claimants are provided with a genuine single point of contact for any issues relating to their claim.
- 4.11** Through its reforms, the Government is taking steps which aim to increase flexibility and deliver a more personalised service through Jobcentre Plus. Work Coaches replacing Personal Adviser, the new Claimant Commitment, the lifting of the 16 hour rule for traineeships, alongside the Intensive Activity Programme being piloted as part of the roll-out of Universal Credit could potentially go some of the way to addressing some of the current shortcomings.
- 4.12** Also in an attempt to address some of these issues, 20 YMCAs will begin piloting a new arrangement with local job centres from January 2015. This will see young claimants living in our homeless accommodation providing their Work Coaches with a description of the circumstances and existing support arrangements so that they can be incorporated into their Claimant Commitment.
- 4.13** However, despite these recent reforms and the scheme described, job centre staff are still largely required to focus their efforts on pushing individuals straight into intensive work search activity and training focussed primarily on the process of looking for and applying for jobs (e.g. CV writing, social media training) regardless of the barriers they face to finding sustained employment.

**Recommendation: YMCA proposes that the Government continue to deliver and report on the actions recommended by the Oakley review.**

**Recommendation: YMCA proposes that Jobcentre Plus invest more time in undertaking a comprehensive assessment of claimants at the outset of their claim to better understand the barriers they face in finding sustained employment.**

**Recommendation: YMCA proposes that restrictions on the length of time which claimants can be in training and still receiving benefits be removed, allowing Jobcentre Plus to place individuals on training for longer than 16 hours a week where lack of skills and qualifications is a key barrier to them finding employment.**

**Recommendation: YMCA proposes that Work Coaches be encouraged to develop close working relationships with other organisations providing claimants with support.**

**Recommendation: YMCA proposes that claimants have a single point of contact within their Jobcentre Plus, who they can contact regarding any enquiries or issues regarding their claim, even when the claimant is referred to back to work schemes.**

**4.14 Undertaking a comprehensive review of benefit sanctions**

A range of measures already proposed in this response such as those on developing a more person-centred welfare system would have a significant impact on reducing the numbers of young people unnecessarily suffering as a result of benefit sanctions, as would the measures recommended by the independent review led by Matthew Oakley as well as the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom.

**4.15** However, given the lack of clear evidence and the devastating impact the current arrangements are having that YMCA think a more comprehensive review of conditionality within the social security system should be undertaken.

**4.16** While the Government are reluctant to change the current arrangements as they claim there is a lack of '*convincing evidence of a causal link between welfare reforms and increased use of food banks*',<sup>xv</sup> they seem content to proceed with a sanctions regime which even based on their own findings, is based on very little evidence.

*"There was no evidence from the survey that knowledge of JSA conditions led to actual movement into work"<sup>xvi</sup>*

The Jobcentre Plus Offer: Final evaluation report 2013

**4.17** A future review needs to be commissioned to examine whether benefit sanctions in their current form are actually achieving their stated goal of encouraging individuals to comply with requirement to help them move into or prepare for work, or as it currently seems, are simply punishing some of the most vulnerable people in society. This review also needs to examine why young people are being so disproportionately hit by benefit sanctions.

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

## Notes

- 
- <sup>i</sup> [Signed on and Sanctioned, YMCA England, Mar 2014](#)
  - <sup>ii</sup> [The young people going hungry in the UK this winter, BBC News, Dec 2014](#)
  - <sup>iii</sup> [Sanctions statistics June 2014, Department for Work and Pensions, Nov 2014](#)
  - <sup>iv</sup> [See iii](#)
  - <sup>v</sup> [See iii](#)
  - <sup>vi</sup> [See i](#)
  - <sup>vii</sup> [See i](#)
  - <sup>viii</sup> [See i](#)
  - <sup>ix</sup> [See iii](#)
  - <sup>x</sup> [See iii](#)
  - <sup>xi</sup> [See iii](#)
  - <sup>xii</sup> [See i](#)
  - <sup>xiii</sup> [Food for Thought, YMCA England, Nov 2014](#)
  - <sup>xiv</sup> [Welfare guides for young people, YMCA England, Feb 2014](#)
  - <sup>xv</sup> [See ii](#)
  - <sup>xvi</sup> [The Jobcentre Plus Offer: Final evaluation report, Department for Work and Pensions, Nov 2013](#)