

Public Accounts Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

29 November 2016

Dear Sir or Madam,

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Patron:  
Her Majesty the Queen  
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The Most Reverend  
& Right Honourable  
Dr. John Sentamu

## **YMCA England response to the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into benefit sanctions**

YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping more than 58 million people in 119 countries. Here in England and Wales where it all began, 133 YMCAs work to transform more than 660 different communities, impacting on the lives of nearly 600,000 people every year.

YMCA enables people to develop to their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

YMCA's integrated approach enables young people to choose from a range of education and skills-based training, as well as work placements and apprenticeships, helping almost 53,000 people to engage in education, skills and training every year.

### **1. The numbers of young people having their benefits taken away is significant**

1.1 Since the new sanctions regime was introduced in October 2012, more than two million adverse sanctions (i.e. led to a sanction or disallowance being applied) have been applied against people on Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment Support Allowance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, Sanctions Statistics, November 2015

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SUPPORT & ADVICE

ACCOMMODATION

FAMILY WORK

HEALTH & WELLBEING

TRAINING & EDUCATION

- 1.2 In total, more 800,000 young people (aged 18-24) on have had their benefits adversely sanctioned since the new regime was introduced in October 2012.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.3 The number of adverse sanctions issued against young people has declined by 97,000 over the last year, however the percentage of those young people (aged 18-24) claiming Jobseeker's Allowance being adversely sanctioned each month remains at around 4%.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.4 Despite this decline, this still equates to a young person (aged 18-24) somewhere in the UK being sanctioned every three minutes, every day, for the past three and a half years.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. It is not just the total number of young people being sanctioned that is concerning, young people are being unfairly singled out**

- 2.1 YMCA has significant concerns that the sanctions regime is continuing to have a disproportionate impact upon young people.
- 2.2 Despite making up a quarter (24%) of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants, young people (aged 18-24) have accounted for 40% (808,000) of the total adverse decisions issues and 39% (412,000) of the individuals having adverse decision issued against them.<sup>5</sup>
- 2.3 This is despite young people being largely aware that they can be sanctioned, with YMCA's research showing that the majority (59%) of young people are aware that they can be sanctioned.<sup>6</sup>

## **3. Young people are being sanctioned for largely minor infringements**

- 3.1 Since the new regime was introduced in October 2012, the three main reasons why young people (aged 18-24) on Jobseeker's Allowance are being adversely sanctioned are:
  - ▶ Not actively seeking employment – 28% (230,000)
  - ▶ Failing to participate in the Work Programme – 28% (225,000)
  - ▶ Failing to attend an advisor interview – 26% (211,000)<sup>7</sup>
- 3.2 As a proportion of adverse sanctions issued, the most substantial change that has occurred since the new sanctions regime was

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<sup>2</sup> See 1

<sup>3</sup> See 1

<sup>4</sup> See 1

<sup>5</sup> See 1

<sup>6</sup> YMCA England, Signed on and sanctioned, March 2014

<sup>7</sup> See 1

introduced has been for claimants not actively seeking employment.<sup>8</sup>

- 3.3 Prior to October 2012, among young people (aged 18-24) this accounted for 10% of the adverse sanctions issued, however since the new regime was introduced this has increased to 28%.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. A significant number of sanctions against young people are still being overturned**

- 4.1 YMCA's *Processed and Punished* research revealed a significant number of cases where errors by job centres were a major contributing factor in many young people having their benefits stopped.<sup>10</sup>
- 4.2 The most common errors reported included not being informed of appointments and a failure of job centres to pass on or record relevant information regarding individual's claims.
- 4.3 The official statistics reveal that almost 90,000 young people (aged 18-24) have had their original sanction decision overturned after being reconsidered or appealed since the new regime was introduced.<sup>11</sup>
- 4.4 More than half (51%) of reconsiderations and appeals made by young people (aged 18-24) led to no sanction being applied, illustrating the scale of the errors being made.<sup>12</sup>
- 4.5 Based on this, what is clear when you speak to young people accessing benefits is that they believe the way sanctions are currently being applied by Jobcentre Plus is unduly punishing them.
- 4.6 Over three quarters (77%) of the young people we questioned felt that the way that sanctions are currently being applied was not fair.<sup>13</sup>

#### **5. The impact of sanctions on young people can be significant**

- 5.1 YMCA has seen first-hand the impact that taking away an individual's main source of income can have.
- 5.2 *Signed on and Sanctioned* gave an insight into the impact of benefit sanctions on young people. A significant majority (86%) of those

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<sup>8</sup> See 1

<sup>9</sup> See 1

<sup>10</sup> YMCA England, *Processed and punished*, March 2014

<sup>11</sup> See 1

<sup>12</sup> See 1

<sup>13</sup> See 6

people who had been sanctioned reported being forced to go without essential items while 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%).<sup>14</sup>

- 5.3 The vast majority of YMCAs now have to refer the young people they work with to foodbanks, with just fewer than four in five (79%) of those referring young people to foodbanks reported having to do this as a direct result of sanctions.<sup>15</sup>
- 5.4 In addition to the financial costs, YMCA has seen first-hand the detrimental effects on young people's physical and mental well-being and many young people reporting that the current application of sanctions actually hindered their transition from benefits into work.<sup>16</sup>
- 5.5 While significant evidence is available on how sanctions are negatively impacting on young people's ability to afford their basic living costs, as well as their health and wellbeing, there is little evidence to show that are pushing young people closer to employment.

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations**

- 6.1 Unemployment remains a critical issue for young people and the country as a whole; as such the Government is right to recognise that more needs to be done to tackle it.
- 6.2 Contrary to much of the rhetoric surrounding those young people accessing the social security system, the reality is that most young people who find themselves out of work desperately want to find employment.
- 6.3 However, in many cases the existing sanctions arrangements merely dehumanise those who access its services, damaging their health and wellbeing and in some cases even setting back their journey into employment.
- 6.4 While young people recognise the need for some form of sanctions for that minority of individuals taking advantage of the social security system, there is little evidence to suggest that the way sanctions are currently being applied is moving young people closer to job market.

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<sup>14</sup> See 6

<sup>15</sup> YMCA England, Food for Thought, September 2014

<sup>16</sup> See 10

- 6.5 For the sanctions arrangements to become more appropriate and effective in moving young people towards employment, YMCA would recommend that job centres are removed from the targets and time constraints that restrict them from providing tailored support they need.
- 6.6 This includes introducing:
- ▶ **A more detailed initial assessment exploring their personal circumstances and aspirations, which is then used to inform their claimant commitment.**
  - ▶ **Specialist youth work coach which remains consistent throughout the length of their claim.**
  - ▶ **More comprehensive regular sign-on sessions with their work coach.**
  - ▶ **Regular opportunities to meet with their work coach at informal drop-in sessions.**

If you require any further information or have any follow-up questions regarding our response, please do not hesitate to get in touch using the contact details included.

Yours faithfully,



Denise Hatton

Chief Executive, National Council of YMCAs