

# Dashed hopes, lives on hold

Single homeless people's experiences  
of the Work Programme

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“It's just like a conveyor belt ... load of people coming in and a load of people going out, and I don't think anybody seems to be any wiser, especially the people that work there.  
Billy, Crisis client

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**Crisis**

### **About Crisis**

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change. Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help homeless people to transform their lives. We are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience.

### **Acknowledgements**

This report would have not been possible without the good will and cooperation of the Crisis' clients who shared their experiences of the Work Programme with us. We are also grateful to colleagues at Crisis who helped us contact some of the members we spoke to and helped arrange the subsequent interviews.

### **About the cover**

Billy has been badly let down by the Work Programme. Thankfully, he is receiving intensive help and support at Crisis and is hoping to fulfil his goal of employment as a support worker soon.

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## **Foreword**

Since its inception, the single homeless people with whom Crisis works have been telling us that the Work Programme has been a massive disappointment. Far from providing them with a much-needed road back to work and independence, it has not moved the vast majority of them closer to a job.

This research draws together these direct experiences and demonstrates that single homeless people have just not received the help they need to get back into employment. Without Crisis' own employment services in the vast majority of instances they would have been parked without meaningful assistance, their lives on hold.

I hope this report will spur Work Programme providers to start improving the quality of their service, how they treat people and the support they provide to really address the needs of people disadvantaged in the jobs market.

But government must also act. The evidence, whether from this report, the Work and Pensions Select Committee, other charities, people on the programme themselves and even some providers, is now overwhelming. The Work Programme is just not working for those it was set up to serve – the most disadvantaged, including homeless people. The government must listen and reform the Work Programme without delay.

**Leslie Morphy OBE**  
Chief executive, Crisis

## Key points

### Entering the Work Programme

- Homeless people want to work but often face multiple and complex barriers to finding and staying in employment.
- The Work Programme was designed to help some of the most marginalised people in society. Yet, homeless people on the Programme are being forgotten and excluded, just as they are marginalised in society. All this reinforces feelings of exclusion and marginalisation.
- Many of the homeless people interviewed recalled feeling more positive about their employment prospects and the future when they were referred to the Work Programme. But their initial hopes turned into disappointment as it became apparent that it would not help them to find the right job and transform their lives as originally promised.

### Quality of support

- The lack of high level personally tailored support appears to be in part the result of a referral and assessment process that struggles to adequately identify homeless people's multiple barriers to employment.
- Courses and training intended to improve participants' opportunities in the job market are often too generic and not specific to the particular needs of participants to be beneficial.
- Advisors' large caseloads means that appointments are often cut short or interrupted. Feelings of exclusion are reinforced as it can feel appointments are no more than a tick-box exercise.
- High staff turnover as well as high levels of sickness absence also affects the quality

- of support homeless people receive. According to most of the people we interviewed continuity-of-care is lacking.
- The lack of personally tailored support combined with over-stretched advisors meant participants felt increasingly marginalised to the point at which they had 'slipped through the net'. Participants' experiences support growing evidence that those facing greater disadvantages in the labour market are being 'parked' by contractors, so that they may focus on people who are more ready to engage with work.

### Sanctioning

- Communication problems (e.g. appointment letters not arriving on time) appear to be endemic in all aspects of the Work Programme experience and can result in homeless people being unjustly sanctioned.
- A number of the people interviewed have been sanctioned. Yet, upon learning the news, many had not been told the reason why and had to wait several days before finding out (thus causing further distress and anxiety).

### Leaving the Work Programme

- One of the twenty-seven homeless people we interviewed has secured employment but they feel their success was in large part due to the support they received from Crisis and another charity – not because of their participation on the Work Programme.
- The vast majority of the homeless people interviewed are still on the Work Programme and continue to visit their advisors (often irregularly). Most deem these meetings a 'waste of time' as their

- early hopes of finding work that suits their personal circumstances have long been dashed. Many report feeling 'forgotten' as if they have 'slipped through the net'.

### **Charities are subsidising the Work Programme**

- It is left to organisations such as Crisis to provide the personalised one-to-one employment support the Work Programme originally promised. But while third-sector organisations are effectively subsidising the Work Programme with all the pre-employment support that they provide, they receive none of the recognition or reward when a participant does succeed in getting a job.
- The Work Programme contractors are not motivated to risk spending on homeless people and/or those who appear hard to help. But even though these people cost more to help, they are also the ones that deliver a greater return in reduced long-term benefit savings. Therefore, if the Work Programme fails to help unemployed people with complex and multiple needs it will also fail to help reduce the benefit bill in the long-term (one of the Government's original objectives).

## **1. Introduction**

### **Why the Work Programme matters to Crisis**

Crisis is committed to helping and supporting homeless people on their pathway back into employment. Losing or being without a job is a cause and consequence of homelessness and so Crisis is dedicated to helping people into meaningful long-term work. In the last year Crisis supported over 300 homeless people into work and 785 attended an employment related course.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, for many people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), finding a route into work will increasingly mean being referred to the Work Programme, the Coalition Government's flagship back-to-work scheme for helping the long-term unemployed into work. The scheme was introduced in June 2011, at an estimated cost of between £3bn and £5bn over five years, and more than 378,000 people were referred in the first year.<sup>2</sup>

In a report published in February this year, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) criticised the Work Programme, saying that its performance in the first year or so was extremely poor and fell well short of expectations. By last July, only 3.6% of claimants on the Work Programme had moved off benefits into employment.<sup>3</sup> This was less than a third of the 11.9% target and, as the report also noted, even worse than the Government's own estimate of the number of people who would have found work if the programme had not been introduced. Moreover the PAC said that the scheme was particularly failing the harder to help and young people.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Crisis supports people into work in different ways, its employment services providing training, information, advice, guidance and coaching to help get single homeless people into employment. For more information see <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/crisis-employment-services.html>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Work and Pensions, Work Programme Statistics. DWP: London available at <http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=wp>

<sup>3</sup> Public Accounts Committee (2013) Statement available at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/news/work-programme/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

A recent Work and Pensions Committee (WPC) report gave the Work Programme an equally damning assessment, saying that providers are giving priority to 'job-ready' claimants and neglecting (or 'parking') those who face greater challenges to finding jobs.<sup>5</sup> The report noted that the Work Programme's differential pricing structure – designed to incentivise providers to support those with more challenging barriers to work – is not having its intended impact on providers' behaviour.<sup>6</sup> According to the WPC the Government spent around £248 million less on the Work Programme than anticipated in 2012/13, due to providers' under-performance.<sup>7</sup>

Crisis has long been concerned that the the Work Programme is giving the least help to some of the most disadvantaged people on benefits, such as homeless people who often face multiple and complex barriers to work.<sup>8</sup> The Government must to do more to ensure that the Work Programme provides effective support for all, not just the people who are easiest to help. It also needs to acknowledge that people with the severest barriers to work, such as homelessness, are often not ready for the Work Programme and first need support to prepare for it.

Crisis set out to collect evidence that captures the experiences of Crisis' clients currently participating in the Work Programme, as well as those who have recently left a Work Programme provider. The study aims to assess the extent to

which the Work Programme is helping those who are most disadvantaged and face greater challenges to findings work.

### About the study

During the period April–May 2013 we undertook qualitative interviews with twenty-seven people who use Crisis' own education, training and employment services in four areas across the UK.<sup>9</sup> We spoke to twenty men and seven women. The youngest participant was 21 and oldest 55. Participants were either homeless at the time of interviewing them or had been recently housed but continued to have support needs. Five participants were ex-offenders.

Twenty-five of the participants we interviewed were receiving JSA with the remaining two claiming ESA. Prior to joining the Work Programme, participants had spent varying amounts of time on JSA or ESA. Eight participants were referred within their first six months on JSA. The majority (twelve) were referred within six months to two years while the remainder had been unemployed for more than two years.

Across the locations participants had been referred to four main primes: Seetec (3), A4E (11), Maximus (5) and CDG (6).<sup>10</sup>

Research participants received payment in the form of shopping vouchers after the interviews. All participants have been anonymised and pseudonyms given.

5 Work and Pensions Committee (2013) Can the Work Programme work for all user groups?, First Report Session 2013-14: House of Commons, London. Available at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/publications/>

6 <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news/wk-prog-rpt/>

7 The Committee urged the Government to use the unspent budget to: extend alternative provision for disadvantaged jobseekers; extend Access to Work to help disabled people overcome the practical difficulties of starting a job; and provide further support for jobseekers who complete their two-year attachment to the Work Programme without finding sustained work. <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news/wk-prog-rpt/>

8 See Crisis, St Mungo's, & Homeless Link (2012) The Programme's Not Working: Experiences of homeless people on the Work Programme. London. Available at <http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/TheProgrammesNotWorking%20final%2023-11-2012%20PDF.pdf>

9 Crisis has Skylight centres in London, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Coventry, Merseyside, Newcastle and Oxford which offer a range of employment related support and other services. More information is available at [www.crisis.org.uk/pages/what-we-do.html](http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/what-we-do.html)

10 The remaining two primes were Remploy and Prospects.

We intend to continue this research next year. We aim to track the twenty-seven participants as they either continue on or exit the Work Programme, tracking their experiences and outcomes. Additionally, we hope to recruit people who have recently been referred to the Work Programme, and compare their experiences to those of people who have been engaged with the Programme over a longer period.

## 2. Entering the Work Programme

All the participants interviewed were referred to the Work Programme through their Jobcentre Plus. Typically they were called for a meeting and their Jobcentre Plus advisor informed them that responsibility for helping them find work had been transferred to a new organisation. They were then given a time and date for a meeting with their new Work Programme provider. Most participants had their initial meeting within two weeks of referral which is in keeping with the minimum service delivery many of the primes promised.

It was not always made clear to participants what the Work Programme was and what would be expected of them. A few participants spoke of being 'very frightened' and unsure after learning of their referral. This was because Jobcentre Plus had told them that they would have to, as one participant put it, be on call 'whenever they want and you must be available, always'. Participants spoke of the 'shock' they felt at their referral and that it felt as if they had come under suspicion for not trying hard enough to find a job.

Some primes declared they favour 'warm handovers' to ensure a smooth transition – consisting of a three-way meeting between the Jobcentre Plus advisor, the jobseeker, and the Work Programme advisor. Two of the four main primes (CDG and Maximus) the research participants worked with recommended 'warm handovers' for those identified as having substantial barriers to work.<sup>11</sup> Yet none of them had been offered one of these three-way meetings to help smooth the transition to the new Programme.

The participants' first meeting with their Work Programme advisor commonly consisted of

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<sup>11</sup> All Work Programmes primes' completed Employment Related Support Services Framework Agreements (a CPA04 Tender), which formed part of the documentation they submitted for the Tender Invitation for the provision of the Work Programme, which are available through the government's Contracts Finder website <https://online.contractsfinder.businesslink.gov.uk/>



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*'just basically sat there ... not knowing what I'm there to do. No instructions, no nothing'.*

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being told about the Work Programme and completing various forms and collecting contact details. An assessment also took place that sought to identify previous work experiences, qualifications held and future aspirations for work. This initial assessment was the key means through which barriers to work were meant to be identified. But the experience often left participants confused and unimpressed. For example, one person described how, having signed in, he was sat down at a computer and 'just basically sat there ... not knowing what I'm there to do. No instructions, no nothing'.

Moreover, participant's housing status was not an area covered during initial assessments. Whether someone was homeless or vulnerably housed only came to light if they shared the information unprompted. Those that did received a mixed response from the Work Programme contractor: a few were given information about further support services they could access while others were left unsure whether any official acknowledgement or record of their vulnerable housing status had been made. It is worth noting that a failure to record a participant as vulnerable can have consequences further down the line if they are sanctioned and need to access the JSA hardship provision. If not logged in the system as vulnerable there will be a delay in access to the support.<sup>12</sup>

A few participants attended induction sessions run by their Work Programme which introduced the Programme to them and what they could expect in the way of support.

However, the subsequent enrolment onto the Work Programme proper for them was sometimes difficult. One had to wait a further five months before a proper appointment with his advisor while the other heard nothing more from them until their Jobcentre Plus advisor chased the prime. She explained that 'time ticked by and I asked my Jobcentre Plus advisor what was happening'. It turned out that the Work Programme prime had 'put [them] down on the system as attending... and they were charging the Jobcentre Plus'.

One of the aims of the referral to the Work Programme and subsequent assessment is to ensure that participants get the personalised support, tailored to their specific needs, which can help them find and maintain a job. However, many participants do not feel the assessment adequately captured their experience, aspirations and the specific support they need to get back to work. A participant explained that his assessment consisted of just submitting their CV to the advisor and being told that 'we'll have you a job in no time'. While another participant recalled worrying that her background and support needs had not been recorded properly and 'felt like I needed to check what they have written'. In some cases, participants requested specific help to address a particular support need but, as one participant put it, was 'fobbed off'.

### **Joy**

Joy said she was encouraged to apply for a cleaning job even though she has a bad back and bending down is very painful. She has a degree and she has lots of experience from working in the NHS. Joy's first language is not English and she thinks her spelling isn't very good. She wasn't offered any help or support to improve her language skills.

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<sup>12</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2013) *Work Programme Provider Guidance Chapter 3a – Mandtion*. DWP: London <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/wp-pg-chapter-3a-22-october-2012.pdf>

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*'Job searching every week or every couple of days. That's it'*

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Assessments are the basis upon which advisors develop Action Plans that set out the jointly agreed goals, activities and timescales that are to be undertaken by participants. All the primes the participants were working with promised an Action Plan as part of their minimum service delivery.<sup>13</sup> Yet, a minority of participants could not say whether they had an Action Plan and many did not know what their Action Plans contained. Others complained that their Action Plans were thin on the specificity of support they would receive (if it included any support at all). In some cases Action Plans simply listed the job searches they were required to do. One participant explained how his Action Plan is just 'job searching every week or every couple of days. That's it'. Another participant explained that his Action Plan it to 'go to Seetec every week, once per week and to apply for jobs and that's it.'

Some participants noted advisors did not seem to listen to them whilst developing their Action Plans. They did not seem to take an interest in the participants' personal circumstances and aspirations. This is perhaps not surprising given that it was not uncommon for participants to simply be 'pushed' into applying for *any* vacancies available, whether suitable or not.

Action Plans should be reviewed regularly. A4E and CDG claim that Action Plans are reviewed at least monthly while other primes said they are reviewed regularly as milestones are reached.<sup>14</sup> The majority of study participants did not have their Action Plans reviewed anywhere near that regularly, if at all.

### 3. Quality of support

Personalised and flexible support that is tailored to jobseekers' needs is meant to be at the heart of the Work Programme. The initial assessment participants go through and subsequent Action Plans that are drawn up are meant to identify the specific gaps or areas where an individual may require further help or training to improve their chances in the job market. However, the evidence suggests that the majority were not receiving the kind of personalised support the Work Programme promised.

#### **Billy**

Billy had repeatedly explained to his Work Programme advisor that he could no longer work in the construction industry because of his arthritis and pins and plates he has in his ankles. Despite this he was still 'pushed' to apply for construction jobs. Billy really wanted to become a project worker in the homeless charity sector and had previous work experience in the sector. He explained to his advisor that he was 'frightened' of computers and wanted to improve his IT skills to improve his chances of finding work in the charity sector. But Billy said that his desire to become a project worker was 'just dismissed, it's never really been discussed'.

As a means to address the identified barriers participants have to securing employment, the Work Programme primes often offer vocational skill development opportunities (what CDG call 'barrier busting support') in the form of training or courses.

The majority of the participants had their Curriculum Vitae (CV) reviewed by their

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<sup>13</sup> CPA04 Tenders available at <https://online.contractsfinder.businesslink.gov.uk/>

<sup>14</sup> CPA04 Tender A4E; CPA04 Tender CDG available at <https://online.contractsfinder.businesslink.gov.uk/>

advisors. Others went on courses to show them how to put together or improve their CV and to write cover letters. This support was often mandatory under the threat of sanctions, despite many participants already having a good CV thanks to the support other agencies had given them. Perhaps more worryingly a few participants reported this was the only type of skills development support they received.

The majority of participants attended courses on how to complete application forms, learning about interview techniques, numeracy or literacy courses. However, they reported these courses were too generic and pitched at too low a level. As one participant put it, they were 'rubbish; somebody explains something to you that's like a two year [old] would understand'. While another explained how she could not understand why she was mandated to attend a training course in retail: 'I don't need to do a retail course, I don't seriously, because I have five years management experience in retail'.

Moreover, the quality of the training available was variable and appeared not to have been very well organised with courses often being cancelled at short notice because they were undersubscribed or due to staff sickness absence. The kind of training participants would have found useful and requested was generally not available. Some participants described their frustration at having their requests repeatedly turned down and how eventually they would simply stop asking.

Instead, advisors encouraged participants to take the training on offer, sometimes in an attempt to redirect them into different types of work, even if not suitable to their personal circumstances and/or aspirations. For example, one participant was encouraged to apply for a job which would have involved a long, expensive journey to work for only a two hour shift, leaving him financially out of pocket. Another had to complete a telesales

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*They treat you as a number, they treat you like you're there to waste time because you don't want to do nothing in your life'.*

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course despite his extensive retail background and desire to return to that sector.

It was not uncommon for participants to be involved in volunteering work; they saw this as a means to gain relevant skills and experience, often in an area they would like to work in. But most advisors disapproved, considering volunteering to be a 'waste of time' because while participants are volunteering they are not looking for paid work.

The relationship between jobseekers and the advisors is central to the specialised support and help people are meant to receive to enable them to secure long-term sustainable work. The four main primes that participants worked with all claim that as part of their minimum service delivery, clients will have regular contact with advisors on a one-to-one basis.<sup>15</sup> A few participants reported having regular contact and a good relationship with their advisors and appreciated the work they did for them or on their behalf. A participant acknowledged it was a challenging job: 'I have nothing against the staff. They're nice guys. It's just the problem with the system'.

The majority of participants had mixed experiences of working with advisors. These ranged from problems with communication to feeling they were treated rudely and with contempt. For instance, one participant explained how when she attended appointments,

*'there is no organisation, the people are very rude, everybody thinks you are there to play games. They treat you as a number,*

*they treat you like you're there to waste time because you don't want to do nothing in your life'.*

Another participant's attempt to raise an issue with his advisor about the quality of support he received was treated as 'though I am being difficult and they will just brush you off'.

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### *As if 'you were on a conveyor belt'.*

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But most participants could also see the pressure many advisors were working under, because of the sheer numbers of people they have to support.<sup>16</sup> Participants said the offices were often very hectic when they visited and described the atmosphere as 'pressurised'. Meeting their advisor, as one participant put it, felt as if 'you were on a conveyor belt'.

This pressure translated into irregular and short appointments as advisors tried to fit everyone and everything in. Instead of the allocated hour, it was not uncommon for appointments to only last around 20 minutes; and even then advisors rarely gave participants their full attention (for example, meetings would often be interrupted by telephone calls).

Short appointments and the fact that advisors often seemed stressed and distracted, meant many participants became disillusioned with the experience of seeing them: for many it became a formality and a 'waste of time'. For example, a participant explained what his time with the advisor consisted of:

*'I go in there, they just ask "what jobs have you been doing" and that's about it, and then I tell them what I've been doing and they*

*note it down on the computer, then they say, "oh you've got a next appointment then," that's it... probably about five minutes'.*

For the majority of participants, appointments could feel like 'tick-box' exercises as opposed to creating a space and time for reflection and support.

Time pressure also translated into advisors trying to contact participants at very short notice for appointments – sometimes first thing in the morning for later that day – if one had become available. Often this created tension between the participant and their advisor as it was deemed unreasonable to expect them to come in at such short notice.

Potentially a further consequence of the pressure Work Programme advisors are under is the high turn-over of staff and also staff sickness absences primes seem to experience. Very often this meant lengthy breaks in support while a new advisor was assigned to participants, while some participants never saw the same advisor more than a handful of times. For the minority of participants that felt well supported by their advisors, the rapport and understanding that had been established was lost when, often suddenly, advisors left. As a participant explained, 'this was not helpful for me ... the lady was really nice'. This advisor had taken his health situation and his hopes for the future seriously 'but after the second meeting, she left the place'.

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<sup>16</sup> The recent House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee was dismayed to find that caseloads per advisor in the Work Programme are around 120-180 jobseekers (First Report Session 2013-14) <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/publications/>

**Megan**

Megan's advisor told her that a part-time cleaning job had become available and that she should apply. She applied and was looking forward to getting back into work and 'back on her feet'. When she got the job, her advisor said she could start straight away, but the job didn't happen in the end. Megan was upset about this, and tried phoning her advisor. They didn't return her calls and she felt very let down by them. The cleaning agency she was meant to work for blamed Megan's advisor for what had happened.

It was also common for participants not to have confidence in their advisors' ability to accurately record information about their case on the IT systems or to securely look after their (personal) documents. A participant explained how his advisor had informed him that all his paperwork, including his CV and cover letter, had been lost. Another mentioned how he now asks for a receipt of any paperwork he gives to his advisor as he no longer trusts him to keep it safe.

Good and timely communication and correspondence between jobseekers and their advisors is integral to ensuring the support they receive is of high quality and effective. However, communication problems were a common feature of the relationship participants had with their advisors. Very often advisors failed to take into account the effect participants' personal circumstances, such as living in a hostel, had on their ability to receive post and access email, or lack of phone credit meaning that voicemails could go unheard.

Other issues arose around letters sent to participants that arrived late or invites for appointments that came after the actual appointment date. Some participants described how they had suffered wasted journeys to see their advisors or attend training courses only to be informed upon arrival they had been cancelled (often at short notice). Primes would often say they had let the participant know about cancellations but many participants said they never received any such notice.

## 4. Sanctioning and its impact

To encourage participants to engage with the Work Programme, advisors can require them to undertake specific activities under the threat of a benefit sanction for non-participation. An activity can include anything that an advisor mandates a participant to do whilst on the Work Programme.<sup>17</sup> Jobcentre Plus retains the role of sanctioning once a Work Programme prime has referred a client to them for sanctioning. Jobcentre Plus will make decisions on whether customers should be sanctioned, if the prime contractor states that they are not fulfilling their obligations.<sup>18</sup> Of the twenty-seven individuals we interviewed eight had been sanctioned and one had been given a warning while waiting to hear whether she would be sanctioned. An additional ten have been threatened with sanctioning.

It appears to be that participants' experiences of sanctioning are characterised by poor communication between primes and Jobcentre Plus as well as primes with participants themselves. A prime must ensure that a participant is notified in writing detailing what is expected of them and the consequences if they fail to comply.<sup>19</sup> The letter should clearly state that if without 'good reason' they fail to attend or participate in the Work Programme their JSA will be stopped. However, not all of the participants who had been sanctioned have a good understanding of what sanctioning was prior to it happening. More participants were aware than not, saying that paperwork did state it clearly, but those who were unclear about sanctioning said they had not received paperwork that clearly explained it nor had their advisor informed them.

### Kieran

Kieran had recently been released from prison and was receiving support from his probation officer at the same time as being on the Work Programme. The advisor would often forget about Kieran's other commitments and make appointments that would clash with the probation service. Kieran said that he was 'threatened with sanctioning' if he did not attend them despite frequently telling the advisor about his probation service appointments.

Of the participants that had been sanctioned, seven learnt through their Jobcentre Plus when they went to sign on. One participant only discovered he had been sanctioned when he tried to take money out from a cash machine as neither his Jobcentre Plus or Work Programme advisor, both of whom he had seen recently, had informed him of the sanction.

Upon learning that they had been sanctioned, or were about to be, many participants reported being genuinely surprised and shocked. They often did not know the reason why they had been sanctioned and/or could not understand why this had happened to them. For many of these participants this started a long and difficult process of trying to find out the details and reason for their sanctioning. In most cases poor communication between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme primes, again, lay at the heart of participants' difficulties, with many getting caught in a 'fog' of uncertainty as they engaged in a series of back-and-forth visits to their Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme

<sup>17</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2013) *Work Programme Provider Guidance Chapter 3a – Mandation*, DWP, London <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/wp-pg-chapter-3a-22-october-2012.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Work and Pensions Committee (2011) *Work Programme: providers and contracting arrangements*. DWP, London <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmworpen/718/71811.htm#note169>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

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*'So upset because I remember it and I called and this woman on the phone told me she would cancel my appointment'.*

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office. Some used up their mobile phone credit waiting on hold and calling various hotlines trying to find out what happened.

Even when participants finally got hold of the person or office that should be able to explain the reason the decision was taken, they nevertheless struggled to find anyone who was willing to explain what happened. One participant explained how he had 'asked the job centre, they said, "you need to speak to someone on the phone," I phoned them, they said "you need to speak to someone in the office" '. They also contacted their Work Programme advisor but his response was 'I don't know, I really don't know'.

Communication problems also lay at the heart of why some people had been sanctioned: the action had been taken because of late or no communication of appointment dates from the prime to participants; people missed appointments because they did not know about them. Other times participants knew they would not be able to make an appointment so cancelled and provided evidence (e.g., medical appointment or probation service letters) to demonstrate they had legitimate reasons for doing so. For example, one participant provided the medical documentation about her forthcoming MRI scan and received assurances that she would not be sanctioned, which later turned out to be false. Another participant was too ill to attend his appointment and rang her Work Programme office, stressing to the receptionist, that 'it's really, really important' the appointment is cancelled and their advisor is informed. When they learnt of the sanction, for the missed appointment, they were: 'so, so upset because I remember it and I called and

### **Billy**

Billy was sanctioned for turning up to a meeting that turned out to be cancelled and then failing to attend another appointment he knew nothing about because the letter arrived six days *after* the date. He received notification from Jobcentre Plus saying that his Work Programme provider had informed them that he had missed two appointments and would be sanctioned for non-compliance. He appealed the decision and asked for clarification from Jobcentre Plus. They claimed not to know anything, despite Billy receiving a letter from Jobcentre Plus which was in response to his Work Programme office sending a letter to them. Billy asked, 'why is nothing known about it? I've walked in confused and I'm walking away baffled'.

this woman on the phone told me she would cancel my appointment'.

Some participants were sanctioned because their advisors deemed their job searching activities to be insufficient and not compliant with their Action Plans. Participants sanctioned for this reason explained that there was always a dispute over the number of jobs they had applied for and what their advisor said they had.

The consequences of being sanctioned revolved around two poles: financial hardship and emotional distress. The docking of participants' benefits had an immediate detrimental impact financially. Many relied on their fortnightly payments to buy food in advance until their next payment. Without their benefits participants resorted to borrowing money from friends and family, made use of local foodbanks or went hungry, turned their heating down, walked everywhere instead of using public transport or in one extreme case a participant said she resorted to begging. A participant was lent £10 by one of his friends to cover the two weeks he was sanctioned.

**Julie**

Julie doesn't like borrowing money but had no choice after she was sanctioned. After she bought food and paid her bills, she didn't have much money left. The food she bought ran out and she had to visit a foodbank so that she could eat. Julie says she is lucky she was ill and wasn't very hungry. She spent a lot of time in bed because she was ill, which meant she could keep her heating on low and not use much electricity.

None of the participants sanctioned were informed about the JSA Hardship Provision by their Jobcentre Plus or Work Programme advisors. The DWP *Work Programme Provider Guidance* says it may 'be useful to inform' a participant that they can receive hardship provision and if they are recorded as vulnerable then they can have quicker access

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*'Get a loan from somewhere. That was the end of the conversation'.*

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to this hardship fund.<sup>20</sup> Instead the advice that some received was often inaccurate – e.g., being told to apply for a crisis loan when they are not accessible to those sanctioned. A participant described the desperate financial situation he was in to his advisor but was simply told to 'get a loan from somewhere. That was the end of the conversation'. The financial hardship generated great anxiety in participants to the extent that a participant described themselves as a 'nervous wreck' resulting from the running around he was doing 'to know if there was going to be any money and what I was going to do'.

## 5. Leaving the Work Programme

Of the twenty-seven people we spoke to on the Work Programme only one participant had left and secured employment. The remaining participants were left in a routine characterised by short visits to see advisors where they would complete the mandated number of job searches and applications they were required to and then leave. The visits had become a 'tick-box exercise' and had little hope for anything different in future. A participant explained that he had come to 'look at it as a formality: they're not going to get me a job, why am I coming here for? I have to go because if I don't they'll sanction me.'

Despite the primes' commitment to regular meetings with clients as part of their minimum service delivery agreements some participants declared feeling 'forgotten', as though they had 'slipped through the net'. In a few cases participants had only seen or talked to their advisor once in the past five or six months. Another, older participant reflected that 'in terms of support it wasn't really one-to-one support it was more, it felt more like, less than like a work programme, more a numbers game'. It is hardly surprising that the majority of those that remain on the Work Programme feel marginalised and that they are not receiving the personalised support they need to find work. Some of the older participants think that 'youngsters seem to get more chances of training than we do' and that it is a 'waste of time' for older jobseekers.

Interestingly, these participants did not appear too concerned about the situation they were in as they already had entrenched views about the Work Programme, and were convinced it would not help them to find work. Moreover, they were being supported

<sup>20</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2013) *Work Programme Provider Guidance Chapter 3a – Mandation*, DWP, London <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/wp-pg-chapter-3a-22-october-2012.pdf>



in this area by Crisis and other third-sector organisations and they seemed happy to focus their attention there instead. For example, one participant explained that, 'if they are going to chase it up [attending the Work Programme] this will stop me from attending courses here [Crisis]'. Furthermore another participant actually saw it as a 'blessing' because seeing his advisor he said, 'just wastes my time. I don't want to waste my time'.

But even participants who continue to see their Work Programme advisors more regularly find that the experience is often disappointing, with a participant explaining that he 'sits for one hour doing nothing along with others who just read newspapers'.

All these experiences add weight to Work and Pensions Committee's concerns<sup>21</sup> that some jobseekers on the Work Programme are being 'parked' by advisors in favour of those who are relatively more work-ready.

One of the twenty-seven participants was successful in securing employment but, in her view, this was not thanks to the Work Programme but the millinery classes at Crisis Skylight London where she discovered her talent for hat-making. She also received support from a Crisis employment coach who referred her to the Aspire Foundation where she received financial support to start her own business.

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

Findings from the research indicate that the Work Programme is not helping those homeless people who may be furthest from the job market. The initial referral and assessment stage of joining the Work Programme is not adequately identifying the specific barriers to work that participants face. This means that most of the subsequent Action Plans and out-of-work support is neither tailored personally to them nor responsive to their specific needs or aspirations. Often, courses and training intended to improve participants' opportunities in the job market were too generic and not specific to the particular needs of participants to be beneficial.

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*'Look at it as a formality: they're not going to get me a job, why am I coming here for? I have to go because if I don't they'll sanction me'.*

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Communication problems appear to be endemic in all aspects of the Work Programme experience. Poor communication between participants and advisors results in support needs not being properly addressed. Further to this, problems with communication between primes and Jobcentre Plus have seen participants lose confidence in a system meant to help them. Findings suggest that those participants seeking a reason and explanation for why they have been sanctioned become caught in a confusing back-and-forth struggle between their Work Programme prime and Jobcentre Plus. This further deepens people's distress at a time of existing financial hardship.

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<sup>21</sup> Work and Pensions Committee (2013) *Can the Work Programme work for all user groups?* First Report Session 2013-14, House of Commons: London  
Newton et al. (2012) *Work Programme evaluation: Findings from the first phase of qualitative research on programme delivery*. DWP: London.

This, combined with significant caseload pressure, often means that Work Programme advisors struggle to deliver high quality one-to-one support to jobseekers. It also means that participants do not receive important paperwork in a timely manner; delayed paperwork and poor record keeping resulting in sanctions being incorrectly applied.

Crisis believe that high quality personalised support can provide jobseekers furthest from the labour market with the help they require. Findings from the research, however, reveal that many people likened their appointments, meetings and support to 'being on a conveyor belt'. Additionally, the support participants did receive on the Work Programme could often be characterised by its 'start-stop nature', due to inconsistent and unreliable contact with advisors. Participants had to seek support from third-sector organisations, such as Crisis, for the personalised one-to-one employment support the Work Programme originally promised.

The lack of personally tailored support combined with over-stretched advisors meant participants felt increasingly marginalised to the point at which they had 'slipped through the net'. Participants' experiences support growing evidence that those facing greater disadvantage in the job market are being 'parked' by primes, so that they may focus on people who are more ready to engage with work. Crisis believe that those furthest from the labour market can deliver a greater return on investment in terms of savings made in working age benefit expenditure<sup>22</sup>, and adopting a more long-term approach will also help reduce the benefit bill in the long-term.

Poor quality support and feelings of marginalisation also means that other third-sector organisations, such as Crisis, take on the responsibility of working with 'parked' clients, often delivering the kind of personalised and specialised one-to-one support the Work Programme originally promised. While third-sector organisations are effectively subsidising the Work Programme with all the pre-employment support that they provide, they receive none of the recognition or reward when a participant does succeed in getting a job.

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<sup>22</sup> Johnson, R. (2013) *The Work Programme is failing the taxpayer* The Guardian 21 May <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/may/21/work-programme-failing-taxpayer>

## Recommendations

### Work programme primes need to better identify homeless people

- Direct questions that address housing status should be introduced at the handover and assessment stage to ensure homeless people are identified;
- If known, information about housing status should be passed on from Jobcentre Plus to Work Programme providers at the referral stage, demonstrating commitment to improving handover of participants;
- The 'vulnerable' status of homeless people should be acknowledged and recorded.

### Assessment of need and support

- A more thorough, needs-based assessment should be introduced that captures early on the barriers to work participants face;
- Improved Action Plans and out-of-work support that provides the actual skills and tailored training that clients need and would benefit from;
- Participants' needs and Action Plans need to be reviewed regularly.

### Improvements to delivery

- A Customer Charter detailing a minimum standard of service that participants can expect should be introduced. Once signed, it should be displayed by all primes wherever participants' access services;
- Primes are not meeting minimum service standards for participants furthest from the job market and must be held accountable for failing the most vulnerable;
- Performance figures should be collated

as part of a National Forum looking at best practice. This would demonstrate how successful providers are helping homeless participants' into work, creating an incentive to improve performance and enhance reputation;

- As part of this, specific targets for homeless people should be added to the Work Programme data collection requirements;
- Work Programme providers who consistently underperform should have their contracts withdrawn.

### Sanctioning

- When participants are sanctioned they should be clearly informed why. This requires more efficient means of communication between Work Programme primes and Jobcentre Plus;
- Upon sanctioning, primes need to clearly inform participants about the appeals procedure and explain how they may be eligible for a JSA hardship payment.

### Programme design

- Intensive pre-Work Programme training should be considered for some homeless people to help them develop the confidence and skills they need to engage more successfully with the Work Programme;
- The Work Programme's funding model for participants must be reconfigured to better reflect the barriers to employment that participants face rather than the benefit they receive;
- The additional funding available for identified homeless people on JSA in the Work Programme's 'early access group' should be made available whenever a participant is identified as homeless, whether that be pre or post-referral to the Work Programme.

## Appendix 1: Case studies

### Megan

Megan is a 27-year-old single woman who lives in Oxford. Megan has work experience in the retail sector. Her last job was as a supervisor in a high street retailer and prior to that she was also a supervisor for another high street chain. She lost her last job after injuring her back at work falling from a ladder. She has been receiving JSA for one year and was referred to the Work Programme after two months.

Upon learning that she was referred to the Work Programme she felt hopeful that it would 'push me in the right direction so I got more options to try and find work'. She found the initial assessment 'quite good and a bit more in-depth than the job centre' and was buoyed by the experience. She was sent on a course which was meant to give her 'better speaking manner and things like that on the phone'. They also offered to help her with her CV but every time Megan tried to attend the CV help session it was cancelled. This has happened 'two or three' times. Megan's attempts to rearrange have not been successful as the CV tutor has not returned her call.

The defining experience of Megan's time on the Work Programme so far has been the sanction she received for missing an appointment. As a result of her injured back Megan has had numerous hospital appointments. On one occasion her appointment to have an MRI scan clashed with an appointment she was due to have at her Work Provider. Megan had received reassurances from her advisor that the medical appointment letters had been copied and the legitimate reason she could not attend her appointment had been logged on the IT system. 'There'd be no problem with it whatsoever' she was told. Megan wasn't completely convinced by these assurances and she rang the office on the morning of the day of the scan to remind them.

Megan continued to sign on at Jobcentre Plus, but on the day she should have received her benefits she didn't get anything. She had met with her Jobcentre Plus advisor earlier the same day but he had not informed her. When Megan returned to find out why she had been sanctioned he could not give her an answer. She spent two hours on the phone to the agency that dealt with her benefit payments who eventually informed her that it was her Work Programme provider that had issued the sanction for four weeks of JSA. By the time the sanction was over she had two cans of food in her cupboard.

Megan has appealed the decision with help from her Jobcentre Plus advisor who helped her complete the 'load of forms', 'very lengthy' appeals book and collate all the evidence she needed. Megan's Jobcentre Plus advisor tried to speak to her Work Programme advisor on her behalf but the advisor would not return their calls. At the time of speaking to Megan she was still waiting to hear the appeals decision.

Megan explained that the initial hope she had felt upon being referred to the Work Programme had turned to one of disillusionment. Being on the Work Programme has been a 'downer' for Megan but she continues to keep up with the number of job applications per week she is required to do. She has sought help from other third-sector organisations, including Crisis, as she feels this is a more proactive thing to do. She explained that from her experiences of the Work Programme nothing has happened and feels she will just have to keep 'just waiting' if she relied on it to find her work.

## Paul

Paul is 47-year-old with a degree in architecture who has been unemployed since April 2011. He has been sofa-surfing for about one year now.

After six months receiving JSA he was referred to the Work Programme. Paul was happy to be referred as he was 'desperate to find work' and 'under the impression that the Work Programme was this organisation that was going to help me find work'. Paul at this time had decided that he wanted to re-train and become a teacher as he thought this would be a good long-term option career wise.

At the first assessment meeting Paul went through the 'usual stuff' with his advisor: what he had done before and qualifications. However, Paul never got to see any Action Plans nor was he aware whether he actually had one. He was encouraged to apply for short-term work in fast food restaurants and attended a training event where the trainer 'started talking about his kid playing football at the weekend'. The same trainer started the course off by informing the participants that they were not doing enough to find work and it was their fault they were still unemployed.

He received CV support but explains that he had 'heard it all before ... it was a just a general talk... something you could do in secondary school'. Sometimes, Paul said, him and his advisor would talk about 'weather and holidays' instead of getting support towards achieving his ambition to become a teacher. His advisor refused to sign him off for a month which would have enabled him to spend four weeks shadowing a teacher and 'be in a better position to find work'.

Paul raised the issue of the quality of the support he was receiving with his advisor. Instead of helping, Paul was allocated to a new advisor. This happened twice and now he is currently working with his Work

Programme prime's specialist advisor for ex-offenders despite having no history of offending. Paul suspects this is because he was audacious enough to raise questions about the quality of the support. He also fears that when he applies for jobs and potential employers see that he is supported by an ex-offender advisor, this may have a negative impact on his chances.

Paul's new advisor would sometimes call him at very short notice to ask him to come into the office to see him. He always tried to attend because he feared being sanctioned but eventually he wrote a letter to his advisor asking him to give him a little more notice. He was told not to submit the letter by his advisor who explained that it would be 'shoot[ing] yourself in the foot'. Paul withdrew the letters after being told, 'if you want to put the letter in then you're the one that's going to be in trouble'.

When Paul was informed by his Jobcentre Plus advisor that he had been sanctioned because they had deemed his job searching insufficient, he was particularly shocked and hurt. Paul had recently met with his advisor and they 'didn't say a word that my money's been stopped' despite them knowing he was homeless and the effect it could have.

Paul continues to see his advisor regularly but his original 'impression that these guys are going to help me find work' has long been dashed. He now feels that the Work Programme will never help him to find work.

## Billy

Billy is 54 years old and lives in a hostel in London. He used to work in construction and warehouses until physical health problems made both untenable (he has pins and plates in his ankles as well as arthritis). His most recent job was as a project worker in a homeless centre but was made redundant in April 2012 due to staff cut backs.

Billy has been receiving JSA since he lost his job and was referred to the Work Programme after five months. At the assessment he told his advisor that he was homeless and living in a hostel but says no note was made of this.

As a long-term homeless person (in his own words he has been 'on and off' homeless since he was aged 14), Billy had got in contact with Crisis after his Jobcentre Plus advisor suggested it and he has been receiving employment related support. When his Work Programme advisor learned that Billy was receiving this support he was unsure of how to help him further. Billy said his Action Plan was asking him to do 'things I was already doing'.

There was one area where Billy did ask for support: IT. He was not confident of his skills with IT and feared that this would stop him finding a job. Despite his Work Programme office having lots of computers, often sitting unused, Billy was not offered any IT support and his desire to work for a homeless charity was ignored even though he had previous work experience in the sector. Instead the advisor 'kept talking about construction' regardless of the physical problems Billy has. His experiences have left him feeling that they have never 'really listened to anything I've been saying'.

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*'We seem to have a lot of problems with people living in hostels getting their post late'.*

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When Billy was sanctioned, because he missed an appointment due to receiving appointment letters late, he appealed the decision. He said that he 'gave up in the end' because it was 'so confusing, it's unbelievable'. When Billy eventually saw his Work Programme advisor to try and clarify why he was sanctioned he was told, 'we seem to have a lot of problems with people living in hostels getting their post late'.

Billy feels that his experience of the Work Programme so far has been 'useless'. His time, he explains, has been characterised by uncertainty: 'it's just like a conveyor belt... load of people coming in and a load of people going out and I don't think anybody seems to be any the wiser'. He prefers the support he receives at Crisis where he feels that his employment coach is '100% behind him' in his search for employment.



## About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help homeless people to transform their lives. We measure our success and can demonstrate tangible results and value for money.

We are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience.

We have ambitious plans for the future and are committed to help more people in more places across the UK. We know we won't end homelessness overnight or on our own. But we take a lead, collaborate with others and together make change happen.

## Get in touch

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# Homelessness ends here