



Social Justice Pulse Review

Poverty and Cost of Living

Why are people facing sanctions for Universal Credit?

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Project Summary

The fear of sanctions is widespread: 86.3% of our respondents are worried about being sanctioned. Our short, pilot survey explored key reasons why people are sanctioned, such as travel costs, unreliable transport and inflexible appointments as well as possible solutions to overcome these barriers. Many claimants rely on public transport and support free or subsidised options. Further research is needed to address these issues and reduce sanction rates.

The Challenge

A Universal Credit sanction reduces, or halts, benefit payments for a set period when claim conditions are not met. In November 2022, the North East had the highest sanction rates in the UK, often leading to severe financial hardship and deeper poverty. Since late 2021, the number of sanctions has surged, with 91.3% resulting from missed appointments with work coaches. Many are penalised due to the rising cost of living. For instance, one client was sanctioned due to missing an appointment with their work coach because they couldn't afford the bus fare to their appointment as well as food for their children.

Findings

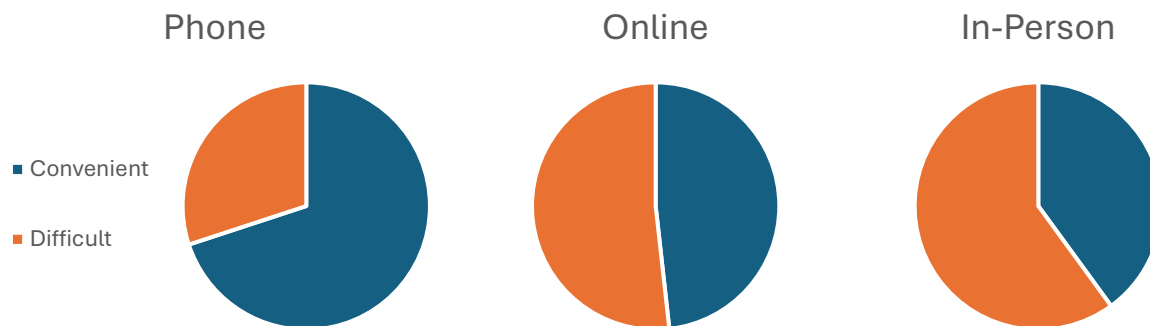
Work Coach Appointments

We investigated why participants missed their work coach appointments, a key cause of sanctions. Five cited personal circumstances (e.g., illness, bereavement), two mentioned public transport issues, and others noted problems like misremembering the date, miscommunication, and parking.

When asked how to improve attendance, many suggested appointment reminders. Others requested more flexible scheduling due to variable work hours or childcare responsibilities. Some participants also found in-person appointments challenging and requested for telephone or online options. Overall, the feedback highlighted various barriers preventing attendance at work coach appointments.

Contacting the Jobcentre

When asked, "To what extent do you find phone/online/in-person appointments difficult or convenient to attend?"



The results indicate a strong preference for phone appointments, but respondents provided varied insights when elaborating. Some mentioned difficulties hearing over the phone and anxiety during calls, while others found phone appointments easier than traveling to the city centre. These findings suggest that DWP should avoid making phone appointments the default and instead tailor appointment types to individual needs and preferences.

Public Transport

Over half of Universal Credit claimants, we surveyed relied on public transportation to attend work coach appointments. Changes or cancellations to public transport can impact attendance and increase the risk of sanctions. Participants identified more reliable and free public transport as the top two improvements needed to help them attend their appointments.

Recommendations

Public transport costs and the reliability of public transport significantly affects Universal Credit claimants in Newcastle. To reduce sanction rates and financial hardship, the DWP and regional partners should enhance public transport services and put steps in place to reduce sanction rates by implementing more appointment reminders, flexible scheduling, and tailored appointment methods could further lower sanctions and boost financial resilience.

Currently, research on Universal Credit claimants facing sanctions is limited, particularly regarding the barriers they face. Increased resources should focus on this issue to better understand the impact of sanctions on vulnerable individuals and identify targeted solutions to alleviate financial hardship.