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A decade on: Walking the sharp edge of the UK's social security system

Amanda Light and Ruth Patrick

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Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
CASE enquiries – tel: 020 7955 6679

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For further information on the work of the Centre, please contact the Centre Manager, Marta Wasik, on:

Telephone: UK+20 7955 6679

Email: m.m.wasik@lse.ac.uk

Web site: <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case>

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Editorial note

Ruth Patrick is a visiting Professor at CASE and Professor of Social Policy at the University of York. Dr Amanda Light is a Mildred Blaxter Postdoctoral Fellow at Nottingham Trent University.

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Abstract

The UK's social security landscape and public services infrastructure have been transformed since the Conservatives took office in 2010, initially as part of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The collision of austerity and a punitive approach to welfare reform have seen a drastic and far-reaching hollowing out of provision, which left the welfare state in poor health to respond to Covid-19 and then the cost-of-living crisis.

There is growing evidence documenting the impact of these changes on society, and a greater appreciation of the harm caused by inadequate social security provision and under-resourced, failing public services. However, not enough is known about how these changes map onto the experiences of individuals over time.

This working paper corrects this, reporting on in-depth research with those at the sharp edge of the social security system. The researchers have conducted repeat interviews with ten individuals for more than ten years, with the most recent interviews taking place during the winter of 2023-24. This research uncovers the extent to which social security and the wider infrastructure routinely fails individuals and their families. It highlights the harms caused by conditionality, and reveals the extent to which repeated fights for entitlement to support can grind people down over time.

Together, these everyday realities across the last decade constitute a powerful and persuasive case for change. With a new Labour government in place, we can and must do better. Investing in social security and reimagining this as a force for good, is a vital place to start.

Key words: change; conditionality; lived experience; poverty; sanctions; social security.

JEL number: I380

Corresponding author: ruth.patrick@york.ac.uk

1. Introduction

The UK's social welfare system and wider public realm has been almost completely transformed by successive rounds of ['reform'](#) and by the long shadow cast by the austerity years of the Conservative-led Coalition Government (2010-2024, hereafter Conservative Government) (Beatty and Fothergill, 2020; O'Hara, 2015). Our essential public services are increasingly threadbare, while our social security system provides 'support' which suspends people far below the [poverty line](#). The intensification and extension of conditionality, which began under Thatcher, and was continued apace by first New Labour and then successive Conservative-led Governments, has radically altered the shape of social security [provision](#): with a 'work first, then work more' (Jones, 2022: 254) approach underpinning contemporary delivery (Pollard et al., 2023; Watts et al., 2014). These changes have rightly been subject to detailed and sustained [scrutiny](#), with analyses documenting the [harms](#) caused by growing gaps in public services provision and by the hardship that an inadequate social security system generates, arguably by design.

But these analyses often provide a snapshot of one point in time, and there is also an urgent need to properly understand how lives are lived against this changing context, and how those who are at the sharp end of austerity experience it over time. In this working paper, we share evidence from repeat interviews with those directly affected by welfare reforms initiated by the Conservative Government of 2010-2024. Significantly, we have followed these individuals over more than a decade, with four rounds of interviews taking place between 2011 and 2023. This long view provides a rich, new understanding of the impact of austerity and welfare reform over time, and how this maps onto individual lives which change and are changed by this context.

In this working paper, we have chosen to focus on six accounts that each cover a twelve-year period (2011-2023). This timeframe allows us to share insights from the lived experiences of Susan, Adrian, Isobella, Rosie, Robert and Chloe,¹ as they have navigated the last decade of welfare reforms. The stories unfolding here focus on people from three main categories: single parents, young jobseekers, or disabled people, but these groupings inevitably merge and give rise to further relevant descriptors, such as ex-prisoners, the homeless, or people with mental health issues. The political and the personal are entangled as we witness the enactment of benefit system changes and a dominant and pervasive emphasis on promoting paid work, regardless of status or personal circumstances.

After exploring individual accounts, we draw out key implications for policy and practice. We conclude with a call to do more to properly invest in social security as a force for good, emphasising yet again how far the policy prescription and narrative on 'welfare' departs from and clashes with the everyday realities of those at the sharp end of austerity.

2. Policy context

This working paper is set against a background of more than a [decade of austerity](#), which was temporarily interrupted by Government intervention during the global pandemic, before being reinstated (2021-2024), albeit, according to former Chancellor Jeremy Hunt, in a [different way](#).

2.1 *The Cameron and Conservative-led austerity years*

The austerity project has been described as a process of 'magical thinking' (Clarke and Newman, 2012: 301), which seeks to present the imposition of stringent cuts as something which is actually beneficial to those directly affected. It has been ideologically reworked as an economic necessity that

¹ These names are pseudonyms to protect participants' anonymity.

[negatively](#) affects public services including the NHS, education, and welfare.

From the very beginning, social security was a central target of austerity measures. The original stated aims of the Conservative-led Coalition Government's [welfare reform](#) programme were threefold: (i) to make the benefit system fairer and more affordable; (ii) to reduce poverty; (iii) to tackle worklessness and welfare dependency, and reduce levels of fraud and error. Proponents of welfare reform argued that the existing system was too complex, and also that incentives to encourage people on benefits to start paid work or increase their hours were insufficient. A very old and dominant idea of the 'problem' of 'welfare dependency' was heavily recirculated across this period as the Government sought to garner legitimacy and bolster public support for their measures.

At the centre of reform efforts, a new benefit – Universal Credit (UC) – was introduced in 2013, bringing together a range of benefits into a single payment, with an overarching aim to '[make work pay](#)'. Personal Independence Payment (PIP) was also introduced in 2013 as a replacement to Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for adults of working age (16–64). Through PIP, the Government aimed to reduce spending by around [20 per cent](#) relative to DLA, through the adoption of a more 'rigorous' reassessment of claimants' eligibility. The introduction of PIP followed the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) in 2008, which had replaced Incapacity Benefit. Between 2010-2014, people on 'legacy' benefits were reassessed and moved onto ESA or other benefits. Anyone claiming ESA required a Work Capability Assessment to assess their capacity to work, with large numbers initially judged fit for work and moved onto Jobseeker's Allowance, while those placed in the Work-Related Activity Group of ESA were also expected to take steps to move towards employment or risk benefit sanctions.

Further attempts to reform welfare within the context of austerity involved a massive range of policies, including:

- A [cap on benefits](#) to ensure that households on certain benefits could not receive more income than the average wage of working families.
- The spare-room subsidy, commonly known as the '[bedroom tax](#)', which works by reducing Housing Benefit or UC payments of tenants of working age living in social/council housing who are thought to under occupy the property. Claimants would face a 14% cut in Housing Benefit per one [spare bedroom](#).
- [Conditionality](#) was extended and intensified through the insertion of a [Claimant Commitment](#) and a significant ratcheting up of the conditions attached to a claim. Claimants were expected to do all they could to find work or prepare for future work, as a condition of receiving support.
- Tougher [sanctioning](#) was introduced to ensure claimants met their responsibilities. At one point, this included the 'ultimate' sanction of three years without benefits for those who failed three times to comply with what were judged as the most important conditions of benefit receipt.²
- The introduction of forms of workfare,³ including [Mandatory Work Activity](#), and programmes of compulsory work experience for the long-term unemployed.
- The [Two-child limit](#), which meant that families who already have two children would not be paid additional UC or child tax credits for a further child or children born after April 2017.

² The 'ultimate' sanction was subsequently removed, with the government themselves admitting it was counterproductive (Butler, 2019).

³ Workfare is the name for a welfare system that requires some work or training attendance in order to receive benefits.

- Retreat from [benefits uprating](#). [Child Poverty Action Group](#) (CPAG) analysis shows that for nine out of the last thirteen years (2010-2023), the Conservative Government failed to uprate benefits in line with inflation.
- The erosion of the principle of universalism within elements of social security provision. This included [means-testing Child Benefit](#) for the first time since the introduction of Family Allowances in 1946.

These cuts and reforms to social security were accompanied by a hardening of rhetoric towards benefit claimants, who were represented in a heavily stigmatised light. George Osborne's emotively worded [speech](#) at the 2012 Conservative party conference is an example of this:

Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next-door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?

Along with David Cameron's (2013) announcement that benefits had become a '[lifestyle choice](#)', this divisive rhetoric mapped onto a much longer history of negative representation of people in poverty, which is itself tied to divisions between the '[deserving](#)' and '[undeserving](#)' poor. During the coalition years, it was common for politicians to also draw on derogatory media representations, including the growth – across this period – of what some describe as '[Poverty Porn](#)', reality television shows which claim to show the reality of benefit receipt, but in fact depict a partial, heavily edited and highly sensationalised account.

2.2 Summary of pandemic and cost-of-living response: 2021-2023

The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically amplified the extent to which the UK's social security system was inadequate to support the economic security of its citizens in a time of crisis, or indeed in any times. A properly functioning

social security system should, Garnham (2020) argues, have been able to provide a genuine safety net to UK citizens when it was needed. This would have lessened the need for work retention measures, such as the [furlough scheme](#) and, subsequently, might have reduced the impact of the inevitable recession that followed. During the pandemic, conditionality was temporarily suspended, with work coaches instead doing 'check ins' focused more on how people were coping (Summers et al., 2021). The Conservative Government also temporarily increased Universal Credit by £20 a week, a tacit acceptance that benefit levels were simply inadequate. Despite sustained campaigning by the poverty sector, this temporary uplift was removed in October 2021.

Just as the restrictions associated with the pandemic started to lift, the UK faced a new context of crisis, with the 'cost-of-living crisis' the consequence of rapidly rising energy prices, and high rates of inflation. The Government responded with a range of measures, including temporary, targeted cost-of-living payments, support for crisis funding for local authorities through the Household Support Fund, and the [energy price cap](#). The Government also bowed to sustained pressure and reinstated the commitment to uprate benefits in line with inflation (actioned in both April 2022 and April 2023). Despite these measures, millions struggled to get by as the cost of essentials far outstripped household income from benefits and/or work.

2.3 Back to basics, back to work: 2023-2024

More recently, as the temporary cost-of-living support packages were disbanded, and during the 2024 General Election campaign, we witnessed a reinvigorated emphasis on the need to ensure that all those who can are in work. From the former Conservative Government, there were pledges to target those on disability benefits, alongside increased pressure on [part-time workers](#) to work more, which sits adjacent to a continued focus on [welfare-to-work](#) schemes. From the then Labour opposition, we saw a hardening of rhetoric, with the then Shadow Secretary of State for Work

and Pensions, Liz Kendall, using a [set piece speech on welfare](#) to state: 'Under our changed Labour party, if you can work there will be no option of a life on benefits' (March 2024).

The Conservative Government also called for a [tougher sanctions regime](#), ignoring the wealth of evidence that documents the ineffectiveness of benefit sanctions both against their own objectives, but also given the extent to which they [drive poverty, destitution](#) and [damage relationships](#) between claimants and Jobcentre Plus advisers.

The 2023 Autumn Statement included proposals to temporarily reform, then scrap the [Work Capability Assessment](#) (WCA) and introduce a [Back to Work Plan](#). Justification for changes to the WCA have been framed against the rapid rise in homeworking since the pandemic. The Conservative's Back to Work Plan has been focused on getting people – particularly those on long-term sick or disability – back into work through a range of measures. These include an increase in work coaches and the powers these coaches have to set conditions, as well as the use of [digital tools](#) to track a benefit claimant's compliance. Academics and Mental Health campaigners called for a more [trauma-informed](#) and [compassionate benefits system](#), criticising the then Conservative Government's proposals as creating an added and unnecessary pressurisation to work. The Conservative Government also proposed changes to Personal Independence Payments, such as replacing cash-based support with vouchers, something which disabled people were incredibly concerned about, which many felt [undermined their expertise](#) to best determine how to spend the funds needed to support them.

While the Conservative Party lost power in July 2024, their decision to target disabled people for reform, and to roll out these radical proposals, [caused fear and anxiety for millions](#) who might have been affected, and arguably further embedded insecurity for an already vulnerable group.

2.4 A new dawn? Labour takes power

On 5th July 2024, Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party took power, with a landslide majority and [a promise](#) to address financial insecurity and restore hope to working families' lives. The new Work and Pensions ministerial team was quickly established, and – at the time of writing – it is too soon to tell how far the new government will usher in a significantly different approach to social security policy, and to employment support specifically. Labour used [its manifesto](#) to commit to a reform of Universal Credit and pledged to tackle rising economic inactivity among younger people and disabled people. The new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Liz Kendall, used her first public appearance to pledge steps to get these target groups [back to work](#), while the King's Speech in July 2024 was overshadowed by an [internal battle](#) about Labour's decision to hold off removing the two-child limit, citing affordability issues.

The coming months and years will see Labour's approach to social security unfold, and it will be vital to closely monitor how individuals are affected by reforms and changes, and to keep sight of how individuals have been changed by the welfare reforms that pre-date Labour, and it is to an exploration of just that, to which this paper now turns.

3. The lived experiences of welfare reform study: Following individuals over a decade of change

This working paper reports on findings from qualitative longitudinal research with individuals directly affected by welfare reform. The research started life as a doctoral study designed to document experiences of welfare reform under the Coalition Government, with three waves of interviews completed between 2011 and 2013 (Patrick, 2017). New funding from The British Academy allowed a further wave of interviews in 2023. In the original study, the sample was segmented to focus on experiences of: single parents, young jobseekers, and disabled people. These groups were

chosen as they were specifically targeted by the Coalition Government's welfare reforms. The fourth wave of interviews were completed with ten individuals, and we focus here on just six accounts. We have chosen those accounts that especially illustrate the dominant themes that emerge from across this research, encompassing experiences of paid employment, of homelessness, of disability, of single parenthood, and of significant mental health challenges.

Alongside the interviews, in the doctoral study participants also took part in a participatory animated filmmaking process, which led to the impactful [Dole Animators](#) film (2013). For this latest wave, we have also worked together to create another short [animated film](#) (2024), and this is part of a broader commitment to including participants in processes of dissemination.

The research is underpinned by an ethics of care and reciprocity, with us routinely signposting and in some cases referring individuals to specific support where this is identified as useful. We have also shared aspects of our own lives in the interview encounters, and research relationships have been strengthened over the years that the research has been ongoing. To support each other as researchers, we have used an online shared fieldwork diary, within which we have been free to pour out the thoughts and feelings that arise as we empathise and try to process the difficult, personal accounts of the participants within the contemporary political context.

What follows are detailed summaries of how the last decade has unfolded for six of these participants, zoning in on encounters with the state and experiences of social security provision.

4. Lives lived against austerity

4.1 Susan: 'Being a single parent is not easy'

Susan is a survivor of domestic violence, who moved to a new city with her daughter to make a fresh start. When we first met, her daughter was mid-way through primary school, and Susan had recently been transitioned from Income Support to Jobseeker's Allowance. Susan was facing an intensive welfare-to-work regime, which included frequent in-person contact with the Jobcentre Plus and the ever-present threat of sanctions.

Susan was referred onto [The Work Programme](#) in 2011 in an effort to help her return to work. In practice, this meant attending three week-long training courses followed by a three-week work placement. After the training, the placement did not materialise, which worried Susan:

After us, immediately, another group was starting and then another group. And while we're still waiting and they are taking on more people, so what was going to happen? And when we were there, they only had, I think, three places that had allowed, um, placement. Um, Poundland, er, Wilkinson and, er, something [...] outside town. (2012)

In the absence of a placement, Susan arranged her own work experience in a school and also managed to secure qualifications as a teaching assistant (TA). By 2012, Susan had sent out four TA job applications and was waiting to hear if she had been successful. Although Susan was now trained to work as a TA, the work programme discouraged this ambition and pressurised her to instead find care work, which they said was less competitive. This was incredibly demoralising for Susan, who was seeking to find work that would fit alongside her parenting commitments to her daughter.

She was also aware that she would not be a good candidate for some of the jobs with most vacancies – e.g. in retail – given her parenting responsibilities and the fact that this limited how flexibly she could work. Susan reflected how being a single parent could go against her in seeking certain forms of employment, such as retail:

... when you're doing placement, you do the same hours. So we did the course Monday to Thursday, ten till two. But the others wouldn't change their hours because of kids and all that. She [potential employer] didn't offer them work. She just took one person who could change the hours. (2012)

This type of flexibility desired by employers is a typical trait of neoliberal working practices, which increased significantly after the [financial crisis](#) in 2008. While flexibility is often reported to be desired by workers themselves, it can in fact be one-sided, suiting the purposes of the employer, not the worker (Jones et al., 2024; [Taylor et al.](#), 2017). As Susan described, having a child and, therefore, limited availability for work, created a barrier to employment within this type of flexible business model.

Susan continued to sign on at the Jobcentre Plus every two weeks across this period, and recalled that the experience differed depending on the staff she had to deal with, *'sometimes you meet someone maybe who's not having a good day and they take it out on you [...]. Some people are nice and some aren't nice'* (2012). The Work Programme also required appointments with an adviser every 2-3 weeks, but Susan found that here there was, at least, some level of understanding regarding a single parent's difficulties of juggling job-seeking requirements with school or school holidays. In order to avoid the risk of [sanctions](#), Susan attended everything and was *'always so cautious [...]. Because I'm thinking, oh my God, if I did [mess up], what do I do with the bills and food for my daughter?'* (2012).

The fear of being sanctioned and having to manage without her benefit income was ever-present for Susan, a constant backdrop as she navigated her everyday realities and sought to secure sustainable employment. Susan was never actually sanctioned, but the fear and anxiety she experienced is a vital reminder of how the presence of the sanctions regime affects and harms many more than those who are actually sanctioned. The Conservative Government might claim that there is an underpinning rationale behind this – e.g., that the threat of sanctions encourages engagement with an intensive conditionality regime. However, in the case of Susan, and for most of the people we interviewed, there are strong orientations to move into and progress in employment, and so the threat of sanctions operates as an unnecessary but harmful feature of the social security regime.

When we meet up with Susan again in 2023, she has been off benefits and working as a TA for about ten years. Susan has always emphasised that she found work as a TA despite, and not because of the help of the Jobcentre Plus, but wryly notes that the Work Programme advisers were constantly chasing her for the details of her job, when she first left benefits, keen to secure their [payment-by-results](#) remittance for ‘supporting’ her into work.

Reflecting on her work in schools, Susan said: *‘it’s really going well. Workwise, it’s, it’s fine’* (2023) but this does not mean that all is well. Financially, things became difficult again once her daughter turned 18, as Susan no longer receives [child tax credits](#), even though her daughter still lives at home. Unfortunately, her daughter developed severe mental health issues and has been *‘even thinking about taking her own life’* (2023). She has been unable to take up her place at university and remains unable to work due to her mental health.

According to Susan, 'life at home' has become a struggle 'emotionally, physically, and financially, it's too hard' (2023). Susan feels that both herself and her daughter have been insufficiently supported, and she has found it almost impossible to access appropriate mental health support for either of them. She considers that it is easier to get help for physical ailments but 'mental health is really hard, because it's something you don't understand' (2023) and it is difficult to access the necessary help. For instance, her daughter, who suffers from 'OCD' [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder] and has an 'eating disorder' has received [Cognitive Behavioural Therapy](#) (CBT) 'twice, and it has not helped', yet she has not been offered any alternative therapeutic interventions. Instead, her daughter received a letter saying:

You've been discharged because we can't help everybody. Of course, that hits her, as well. The little she was eating, she even went down a bit (2023).

For herself, Susan says that she would like counselling for all she has been through, including her broken relationship with her husband and the problems she is encountering with her daughter. However, all that seems to be offered is CBT; Susan feels this will never help to get to the root of the problem because 'CBT is teaching you how to cope with anxiety. You are not tackling what is causing the anxiety' (2023).

In an effort to secure some financial support, Susan applied for Universal Credit (UC) in 2022, which 'took about three months, without any, anyone inform us, without even receive a reply to it' (2023). After a long and stressful application process, Susan receives only £23 per month to top up her low wage. Susan describes the difficulty of meeting essential costs for herself and her daughter on a TA salary, (which has a yearly national average of £12000) and against the context of rapidly rising prices:

... the Child Tax Credit was a really big, big help, but since that has stopped, as well, and it's just my wages. And of

course, they have all – the rent has gone up, the Council Tax has gone up, everything has gone up, but my wages haven't.
(2023)

The outcome is that everyday life is experienced as '*a struggle*' (2023), and Susan feels that the (now former) Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, is '*out of touch*' (2023) with the reality of many people's lives.

Susan then is one of the 'hard working families' proclaimed by both the Conservatives and Labour (previously the opposition), who 'does the right thing' and is in paid employment. Despite this, she faces everyday struggles to get by, and has been adversely affected by the hollowing out of public services, struggling to get mental health support for her daughter and herself at a time of acute need.

4.2 Adrian: 'I looked like the land of the dead, do you know what I mean, being sanctioned'

Adrian is an unemployed single adult, who – when first interviewed – was in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance and Housing Benefit. He had spent most of his adult life in and out of prison, and had never been in paid employment.

Adrian faced continued pressure from the Jobcentre Plus to apply for jobs or risk benefit sanctions. He had been [sanctioned](#) on numerous occasions for reasons such as non-attendance on a course or missing an interview. In response to this, he developed a routine of signing off Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), stating that he had '*got a job, a couple of weeks later [saying] oh, it was just temporary, sign me back on*' (2012).

Attending the Jobcentre Plus caused him a great deal of '*stress*' and he felt better when he did not have to go there. However, the uncertainty and weeks without money had led to growing debt and, eventually, homelessness. Adrian shared:

I've lost everything. I've left ... all I've brought is about 30 videos, my video player and some CD's and that's all. [...] There was no, there was no way I could carry everything, there's nowhere to store it. (2012)

In September 2012, Adrian had been evicted from his flat and received a Court notice to pay off a £2000 debt for unpaid rent. The debt had built up when he was enrolled on a Jobcentre Plus course, and had not been aware of the changes:

When you go on that course they don't automatically switch over your Housing Benefit you have to go and do it yourself, but they didn't tell me that the first, first time around, so I've been sat there for like months and then I get this letter saying, oh your Housing Benefit in't being paid you need to start paying. (2012)

Adrian had applied for a [Crisis Loan](#) (now called Budgeting Loan) and received a [Hardship Payment](#) of £30 every two weeks while he was sanctioned, which he needed to top up his phone credit and to have internet access in order to apply for jobs.

The Jobcentre Plus's involvement and repeated sanctioning did not help Adrian to find a job and he found the whole system counter-productive:

[It] was just really stressful, I just kept pulling my hair out you know what I mean. It wasn't helping, wasn't listening to me or anything, I was telling them what I wanted to do, but they were just pushing me in another direction [...] I don't even wanna be anywhere near the Jobcentre, I just want a job and it doesn't feel great to be honest. (2012)

Adrian felt that his previous criminal conviction and a lack of suitable jobs presented barriers to work, which it was incredibly hard for him to overcome. This weighed heavily on him, and he faced a present of

recurrent disappointment, but remained committed to trying to imagine a better future for himself:

... it feels like I'm just stuck in a point in time if you know what I mean, I can't see further in the future so you're worried about what's gonna happen you know what I mean, that's it really, that's just my downs. My ups I just, I do actually just look up out of it and think, you'll get somemat.
(2012)

Across this period, Adrian was subject to repeated sanctions and he routinely subsisted on one or two meals a day. Ironically, these repeated sanctions reduced his work-readiness as he was physically and visually malnourished, making him unpresentable to potential employers, and meaning that work-search time was instead spent seeking food charity:

And trying to pick yourself up, you just look in the mirror and see how hungry you are [...] I mean, I've lost a lot of weight because of it. That's really put me down. I walk down the street – like I got pulled by a copper a few months ago, searching me for Class A drug, they thought I were a crackhead 'cause of the size of me. (2012)

When we meet Adrian again in 2023, he explains that he has not worked during the past ten years. He continued to be sanctioned (*'it were just constant, non-stop'*) between 2012 and 2017, and blamed his *'mental health conditions on it. Cause I never had 'em before'* (See [Mind](#)).

In 2017, he *'got locked up'* for three and a half years during which time he *'got diagnosed with mental health and that, mental health issues'*. On leaving prison, he had to stay in a hotel due to [Covid-19 lockdowns](#), applied for housing but they *'wouldn't help'* him, did some *'sofa surfing'*, and became technically *'homeless'* once again. Adrian's spell in prison resulted in access to mental health support and a diagnosis, and on

release from prison he was awarded limited capability to work through Universal Credit (UC), and [Personal Independence Payment](#) (PIP).

This meant that – for the first time in his adult life – Adrian was not subject to an intensive conditionality regime, and was instead able to invest some time and energy into seeking to improve his mental health. Adrian has moved to London – fulfilling a long-held ambition to live in the capital – and rents a private flat share, which he says feels like a fresh start. He believes that he has *'got the help that I needed, got on the right medication,'* and now spends a good deal of his time *'boxing'* or at the gym, trying to increase his body weight which is currently very low. He explains that the application for UC was *'a lengthy process, but it was straightforward'* (2023). His limited capability for work UC award means that he no longer has to attend the Jobcentre Plus, which is a relief because it is *'less stress on [his] mental health'*. As an alternative, he says:

I have a mental health employment worker who is actually helping me get employment. I'm not sure I'm ready yet, but I'm wanting the training before I am ready, you know what I mean, so when I'm ready, I can go straight into it. (2023)

Adrian has considered the pros and cons of entering employment, but is worried about how he would afford to pay his London rent:

I've worked it out, the wage does seem like I'll be better off. But I'm just – you know what I mean? But at the same time, I'd have to find another property because of the rent, the rent I'm paying at the moment [£1100 per month]. (2023)

In response to Chancellor Jeremy Hunt's [Back to Work Budget](#), Adrian argues that increasing sanctioning is *'not going to solve a problem, it's going to create a problem'*. In summing up his lived experience, Adrian recalls that when sanctioned:

... you find yourself focusing more on looking for food and everything, rather than looking for work, which you're supposed to be doing. They say it's going to get you into employment faster but nobody wanted to know me, because when they look at you in that state ... you know what I mean, 'cause you do, you get into it. You're not eating, you can, you can do so much damage to your body. So you can see it physically. You know what I mean? And people just don't want to touch you if you're coming to apply for a job. (2023)

Much of Adrian's 20s and early 30s were dominated by a cycle of benefit sanctions and extreme hardship, followed by spells in custody. It was only because of a lengthy prison sentence that he was able to access the mental health support that he needed, and secure a diagnosis for his severe mental health challenges. This diagnosis helped him to then claim benefits which placed him outside of the intensive conditionality regime, something which enabled him to start to focus on improving his mental and physical health. Adrian's story is one of the harm caused by repeated sanctions – and echoing Susan – what happens when an absence of mental health support in the community leaves you struggling to navigate a punitive social security system. Adrian's story is a damning indictment of a sanctions regime, that leaves people looking visually malnourished and unable to meet their basic, and essential needs.

4.3 Isobella: 'More worry, more stress, and more just feeling that, you know, sort of again, I'm back on the scrapheap'

Isobella is a disabled women with a long history of employment as a legal secretary. When first interviewed in 2011, she was living with declining and multiple health conditions, and was feeling very worried about being transitioned off Incapacity Benefit and onto – what was then a new benefit – Employment and Support Allowance.

When we first met Isobella, she was feeling very concerned and anxious about being migrated onto [Employment and Support Allowance](#) (ESA). Her fears proved well-founded as she was initially placed in the ESA's work-related activity group (WRAG, which was subject to a 12 months cut off for those – such as Isobella – on contributory-based ESA. During this period, Isobella received conflicting information regarding the length and conditions of the award. In addition, despite a medical report that '*stated quite clearly [that she] would be unable to work in the short-term and, quite probably, in the long-term*' (2012), an appeal for [Disability Living Allowance](#) (DLA) was rejected.

Isobella was required to attend work-focused interviews at the Jobcentre Plus, experiences she found '*unpleasant*' and '*humiliating*' (2012) due to the environment into which she was newly immersed. After many battles and the eventual involvement of her MP, Isobella's ESA claim was re-examined and she was moved into the ESA support group, which secured her entitlement to the benefit into the longer-term. She also secured DLA entitlement following an appeal at tribunal, and the involvement of a welfare rights adviser plus the help of her local MP. She reflects:

I was getting nowhere with them [DWP], they weren't answering my letters and they weren't really conversing with me and I just thought, well, that's the next step to do [...] knowing you've done what you can to get as far as you can, knowing that you're in the wheels of bureaucracy – which run very badly – so I was just pleased that [they] had taken up the case for me. (2023)

These battles were navigated alongside Isobella's efforts to manage her declining physical health, and experiences of change within the benefits system also caused Isobella a great deal of stress. She was angry at the Government and became '*far more critical of them, of what they've done and the – and the problems that they've put people through*' (2012). She

felt she was on the 'scrapheap', with a 'disability [that] isn't going to improve and, in fact, [was] getting worse' (2012).

Despite many years of paying taxes and national insurance contributions through employment, Isobella felt that the [negative rhetoric](#) voiced by then Prime Minister David Cameron indicated that 'the Government is telling me that I'm a useless scrounger' (2012). Isobella found the benefits system in general, and the Jobcentre Plus in particular, an emotionally unpleasant system to navigate, from having to 'walk through all the ten million pieces of security thinking that, um, have I done something wrong?' to the sense that 'you seem to take one step forward and two steps back. And the [...] people at the [DWP] don't know what's going on either' (2012). Obtaining accurate knowledge and information continually proved to be difficult, and she expressed a hope that in the future the benefits system would be reformed to provide meaningful and empathetic support.

However, further benefit changes have affected Isobella in the intervening years. With the introduction of the [Personal Independence Payment](#) (PIP), Isobella was awarded a lower rate, with a few hundred pounds less per month than when she had been in receipt of DLA. The transfer to PIP and lack of clarity regarding the length of the award created a lot of stress, with 'confusing and contradictory' (2023) information, plus anxious [delays](#) while waiting for responses or outcomes. By this stage, Isobella felt too exhausted to challenge the decision regarding lower-rate PIP:

... as each battle progresses, you're obviously getting older, and the thought of having a battle when your health wasn't very good, and you need the energy for other daily living, umm, rather than fighting the [DWP], you know that's another factor, isn't it, that as you get older it becomes more problematic and more difficult to sum up the energy to stand up for yourself. (2023)

During the pandemic, only those in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) were given an [uplift](#), and Isobella *'felt quite discriminated against'* (2023) because it was *'more likely to have been people on the disability living allowance'* who were still in receipt of *'legacy benefits'* (2023). Having now reached pensionable age, Isobella finds that things are currently better financially, with income from a state pension, private pension and PIP. However, over time, and in line with the degenerative nature of her condition, Isobella's health and mobility has deteriorated significantly, and she is *'having to use taxis more often'* (2023), which adds significantly to her everyday costs.

Although no longer stressed by the benefits system, Isobella has noticed that she feels *'a little bit down more often'*. Her view of the Government is deeply critical, and she is very negative about the proposed reforms to disability benefits announced by the Conservatives in the 2023 Autumn Statement. She says these changes:

... will have a detrimental long-term effect, and whatever gains you have at the, will be short-term gains, and will give the recipients much more mental health issues that will need to be dealt with later. And yeah, I think [...] that there'll be a lot of people who should be on a disability award, [who] are being found fit for work, and again, that will cause much untold suffering. (2023)

Isobella had to stop paid work when she was diagnosed with a deteriorating and life-limiting condition in her 40s. Instead of finding a social security system ready to provide her support when she could no longer work, Isobella encountered repeated barriers to benefits: facing a system that was unempathetic and experienced by Isobella as hostile. Over the past decade, she has faced recurrent stress and anxiety as she has had to fight for what she is entitled, often needing the assistance of welfare rights advisers, and her MP, to secure this support. Over time,

these struggles have ground her down, and this is perhaps nowhere more evident than in her most recent decision not to challenge her PIP award. She simply could not face another battle, and this arguably serves as a damning indictment of the social security system.

4.4 Rosie: 'I don't think the Jobcentre is much help in getting people back to work. I don't think there's many opportunities available'

Rosie is a single parent to one child. When she was first interviewed, Rosie was rotating between unemployment and insecure and often temporary jobs. She was also struggling with her mental health, and facing the move from Income Support onto Jobseeker's Allowance.

When first interviewed, Rosie described her ambitions to find work that she could progress in and that she could combine with her role as a single parent. Her son had started pre-school three days a week, and Rosie wanted to work part-time in order '*to be able to at least get [him] from school sometimes*' (2011). She did not experience the Jobcentre Plus as a place to go to for support, and instead was frustrated by her interactions with them:

I feel like as soon as you've been for your appointment they've forgotten about you. Even though they've promised that they'll do all these ... you know, you're on the waiting list and we'll get back with you next week, we'll ring you, and no you don't ring me. (2011)

Following a period of voluntary work with her housing association, she started working as a Project Officer in April 2012. Being offered the job and feeling '*part of the team*' (2013) really improved her mindset. Her role involved helping others in a similar situation to herself, and Rosie felt well supported and excited about the new opportunity.

Rosie's wage still meant she was on a low-income (£625 per month), and she continued to receive housing benefit towards her rent and [working tax credits](#) to top up her wage. Rosie described how she struggled with receiving her working tax credits monthly, along with her salary, and would have preferred weekly or bi-weekly payments. While Rosie tried to develop a routine to manage her money, she found all the bills very difficult to juggle on a low income and she sometimes received fines from the bank and a couple of court orders in relation to historic debt.

Although she recognised all she had achieved, Rosie's moods were 'up and down' (2013) and she felt her past depression had left its mark:

Sometimes I'm scared to be happy and glad about things, because I feel like it's just all going to come crashing down like it always has done [...] but then you realise that I've actually put that effort in as well, you know, did all that voluntary work and I must have proven summit for them to want me to work there. (2013)

Rosie's self-esteem was improved by the recognition that she was good at her job, and working made a big difference to her mental and financial wellbeing. She reflected that 'I've been poorly through depression every time I've been on benefits' (2013) and she did not want to go back to being solely reliant on social security. Rosie believed that more support, rather than more money, was needed to help people get into work, and that the Jobcentre Plus needed to consider what was suitable for individuals.

Fast forward ten years and Rosie has been working as a 'location manager' for nine of them. With her son aged almost sixteen, she says she has 'been able to work different hours because I'm not having to worry about childcare anymore' (2023). Working up to full-time

employment has *'been a gradual thing'* that has *'all been in line'* with her son's needs, and she feels she has a *'good work-life balance'* (2023).

The DWP does not recognise the necessity of this gradual shift, however, and as of [October 2023](#), parents with children aged between 3 and 12 are expected to look for up to 30 hours work per week. Taking on extra hours while juggling children and childcare disproportionately affects single parents (Andersen, 2023), and as Rosie discussed at the time, *'I wouldn't have managed it and I'd probably have made myself a bit ill, you know, worrying about things'* (2013).

Five years ago, Rosie was temporarily *'dismissed from work'* and needed to sign on to Universal Credit (UC). Since then, she has continued to receive UC to top up her wages. This has *'been a huge help financially over the past four years because it gives me that extra bit of money on top, on top of my wage'* (2023). Signing on to UC involved returning to the Jobcentre Plus:

... which just brought back awful memories because I just don't think it's a very helpful place, you know, and I feel like they're quick to judge, maybe and they don't – I feel like they don't listen to your personal circumstances you know. I wanted to get back into work and I were in a bit of a sticky situation, I didn't really know what to do. I just feel like the Jobcentre don't support people. (2023)

Describing the Jobcentre Plus as a *'cattle market'* (2023), Rosie further recalls:

... they were looking at jobs for me, and some of them were [7 miles away], and in my mind, I'm thinking, 'How am I going to get [my son] to his childminders and then me get on a bus to go [there] for then me to be back in time to pick [him] up from nursery?' Like, I don't feel like they, they listen

to people's circumstances and what is actually manageable. They say what's manageable when they don't even know your circumstances [...]. Although the money has helped me, obviously, you know I think the, you know, Jobcentre never helped me to get a job. I helped myself. (2023)

In her interview a decade earlier, Rosie had thought – and had hoped – that she would not be on benefits in five years' time, but reflected that *'even now I'm on benefits [...] I'm still getting Universal Credit, but I also work quite a lot of, you know I work a lot, near enough full-time'* (2023). This situation resonates with [criticism of welfare reforms](#) that are known to push more people into work, yet such work often remains part-time, low pay and poor quality (Wright and Dwyer, 2020), with workers paying little in tax and often still reliant upon in-work benefits. Most recently, academics have shown how conditionality actually drives down and impedes job quality, operating in direct opposition to wider policy objectives around creating economic, inclusive growth (Jones et al., 2024).

As a single parent, Rosie encountered barriers to work connected to her parenting responsibilities and her ambition to find part-time employment. Due to her own efforts, and engagement in voluntary work, Rosie has been able to progress in employment, and gradually increase her part-time hours as her son progressed through school. Her low-income means that she needs social security support to top up her wage; and this is vital in enabling her and her son to get by. She might be described as a welfare reform 'success story' and certainly would agree that work is good for her mental health; but her successful transition into secure employment was the result of her individual efforts alone, with the Jobcentre Plus input and threats of sanctions playing no part. Like most social security claimants, Rosie was incredibly motivated to secure paid work, and was an expert in what was possible for her and her family.

4.5 Robert: 'I just said, how can, how do you expect me to live, I'll die if I don't get no money'

Robert is a single adult, who, when first interviewed, was in his mid-twenties and had been claiming Jobseeker's Allowance intermittently since 2007. He lived alone with his two dogs. Robert had a casual job as a steward in a local sporting stadium, which affected the amount of benefit he received each fortnight.

Robert followed a pattern of alternating between short-term temporary work and signing onto Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). In 2012, he had recently finished a three-week job as a labourer because there was '*no work left on the site.*' On this occasion, he '*didn't sign on straight after*' because '*there were meant to be more work there but it didn't end up coming*' (2012). Robert regularly left a gap between a job ending and signing back on, as he was keen, where possible, to be in paid work rather than in the benefits system. Signing back on to JSA was not always straightforward, and on a previous occasion, Robert needed a Crisis Loan (now called [Budgeting Loan](#)) while waiting for his benefits to come through.

Robert discussed how he preferred '*to be working*' rather than claiming benefits, that it kept '*me mind occupied so I don't get bored*' (2012). He enjoyed work '*banter*' and was hopeful that he would '*soon be working on doors in town. I'll be doing car parks I think. Or work sites on a night*' (2012). He had received his [Security Industry Authority](#) (SIA) licence, which was applied for through an organisation that works with people from disadvantaged communities, and '*funded*' through '*a foundation.*' He was hopeful that the SIA would '*open more doors and stuff*' (2012) and the licence would be valid until 2015.

One of the key barriers to finding secure employment was because of the gaps in Robert's CV that were created, and hard to keep track of, due to

the amount of short-term insecure jobs, and regular signing on and off to JSA. The Jobcentre Plus agreement stipulated that he had *'got to apply for part time, temporary and full-time jobs'* (2012), and the bad state of the economy was reflected, he felt, in the fact that he was routinely offered *'part-time or temporary jobs'* instead of *'full-time and permanent'* (2012).

Having already been on the [Work Programme](#) for more than a year, Robert refused to continue to go to what was called the *'Job Shop'* every week because *'they try getting you to do basic skills [and] I've already done 'em. I don't need to do 'em again [...] they're rubbish'* (2012). He protested that it took an hour to get to the Job Shop to use the internet to search for jobs, when he could go *'five minutes around to me mate's house and [use] internet there.'* He described how he'd had *'five different work coaches 'cause they don't – they just pass me on'* (2012), and always made sure to attend the appointments with the advisers because *'them ones they do sanction you'* (2012). He shared his experience of his current adviser:

She give me some paper about that thick with 70 places to ring up, right, to apply for all the jobs I've got. And she goes, if I didn't do it I've got a sanction. So I said, I said to her, well if you, if you put all the phone call credit on my phone, I'll do it happily. But she said, oh we can't do that. So, so I said, well I can't do that then can I? (2012)

The jobs were all in security, which Robert wanted to do and he applied for about four of them, explaining:

... it's how she spoke to me about it. Now if she would have said, would ya, not you have to – that's where they go wrong. If they say, you have to do it, then no I won't do it. But if it's would you do it, then yeah I would. But I'm not having somebody telling me to do somert... (2012)

Conditionality demands compliance, achieved through the threat of punishment, rather than fostering engagement through the development of trusting relationships and support ([Pollard](#), 2023). Robert's encounters with the Jobcentre Plus manifested in a negative, punitive way, corroding the relationship between claimant and adviser. Despite finding that the Jobcentre Plus were not helping and were treating him in a demeaning way, Robert felt he had no choice but to attend future appointments to avoid the risk of being [sanctioned](#). He said that were it not for the threat of sanctions he would not attend (2012).

When we meet Robert again in 2023, we find he has '*been homeless for nearly ten years*' (2023). Unfortunately, back in 2013/14 Robert had been burgled and when the police turned up at his flat, one of Robert's dogs had bitten a police officer. Robert was convicted '*for owning dangerous dogs*' (2023). Angry and grieving, he said he '*decided to smash my flat up because the council wanted me out of the flat*' (2023). This led to him being evicted from the property and he has been '*sofa surfing*' at friends' houses ever since:

It's pretty hard, to be fair, 'cause sometimes, there's – if it's like Christmas time, I've got a lot to move further away from out of [West Yorkshire] anyway. I go to my other mates normally about November time, but they're in [East Riding] them. Well, it's just a pain. [...] I just move my stuff with me, me, just me TV and my clothes and stuff. That's it. (2023)

In terms of employment, Robert describes how he continues to '*bounce about*':

I still do labouring and working on building sites. I can't do my SA – my SIA anymore because there wasn't enough, wasn't enough work out there at the time. Er. Sometimes I work in farmers' fields up in [East Riding], to do like potato picking, strawberry picking, stuff like that in season. (2023)

This insecure and irregular way of working is *'just like the normal'* (2023) for him now. As with many jobs that are at the sharp edge of [precarious employment](#), his income is dependent on many factors beyond his control, for example, the seasons and the weather, *'if it's rubbish weather, I might earn hundred pound a week [...] It's long hours as well'* (2023).

Robert considers his life to be worse than ten years ago:

It's got to be worse, hasn't it, 'cause I don't have nowhere permanent to stay. You don't know when you're coming and going [...]. Sometimes I get depressed with it, but I just crack on with it most of t' time. (2023)

As a *'borderline diabetic'*, being homeless makes it difficult to maintain a good diet:

... when I'm just moving all t' time. [...] You got to, like, plan what you're doing, you're doing within like a week, so you know exactly what you need to buy [...] you can't have it just stuck in the freezer neither 'cause you don't know where you're going to be. (2023)

Robert has been in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) *'on and off'* over the past ten years. He found UC *'weird 'cause you've got to budget your money for a month haven't you? And it's a little bit hard to do when you're not in one, one place at once'* (2023).

Sanctions are still a constant threat, as Robert shared:

... we lost all us work last year, I'll – I signed on last year, and I got sanctioned for two years [...]. I made my money last me two months, and I signed back on and they squashed it [...]. It's because, 'cause I were that stressed, I were like – know, one of them people, they fall to sleep at random times? [...] I

overslept one day on me mate's sofa, and he didn't get me up for me appointment, so they sanctioned me. [...] It were hard [...]. I just lived on t' Super Noodles, like a proper student!
(2023)

Despite the sanctions, Robert thinks that UC is preferable to JSA because it is '*a different system.*' Rather than being forced to apply for jobs he does not want to do and being given targets, '*they say to you that – what do you want to do, instead of, right, you need to apply for 20 jobs this week*' (2023). UC is also, perhaps, a better fit with the reality of his working life, and the cycling between unemployment and temporary, low-paid work. In the future, Robert has hopes for '*a job all year round what pays all right*' so that he '*can get an house to live in.*' Ultimately, he reflects, '*the thing I'm more bothered about now*' is '*just to get somewhere to call my own*' (2023).

Robert lives at the sharpest edge of precarity, homeless, and working in temporary and insecure employment. Across the decade, he has continued to work, even while facing homelessness. He has to rely on friends to accommodate him, and is probably hidden from official statistics of homelessness. Robert's account exposes the fallacy of the 'work is the best route out of poverty' promise, while many of his encounters with Jobcentre Plus advisers, with their tough conditionality bent, corroded the possibilities for a more supportive relationship to develop.

4.6 *Chloe: 'I ain't got absolutely nothing right now [...] me and me kids [...] I ain't got nowt in fridge or freezer. I'll show you if you don't believe me'*

Chloe is a single parent, who, when we first met her, had two young children and lived in private housing. She was a year away from being moved from Income Support onto Jobseeker's

Allowance, at which point her youngest child would have turned five and would therefore be attending full time school. Chloe has poor mental health and struggles with substance and addiction issues.

Chloe found the transition from Income Support to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) (in 2012) to be worse than expected. She reported that fortnightly rather than weekly benefit payments made it difficult to manage, and that she received less money once transferred onto JSA. As a result, she quickly fell into debt: *'I'm up to me eyes in debt now 'cause I can't pay me bills.'* Chloe was also anxious about having to attend the Jobcentre Plus, explaining:

... in winter and that, not just in winter it's summertime as well, I can't – it's not like I can't go out, it's – but it's like I can't go out so I were phoning, like, sick to the Jobcentre and then they, they, erm, sanctioned me and stopped all me money. (2013)

Chloe's mental health issues had led to a fear of going out, and an additional fear of attending the Jobcentre Plus was, in part, because they were *'asking me about computer and all that; I don't know how to do it.'* In 2013, Chloe was [sanctioned](#) for *'up to four to eight weeks'* for failing to job search or attend the Jobcentre Plus in person. The sanction was *'pretty alarming when you've got kids and bills and an 'ouse to run'* (2013), and it led to further debt. Chloe said *'I think I cried solid for, like, two week. I couldn't cope.'* (2013) She described feeling like *'I can't lift my head above water'* (2013), and set out what everyday life was like for her:

I don't get dressed; I only open my curtains 'cause I look at people [laughs]. But yeah, if I can sit here or there on me own and just – it's not even like I watch telly. It's just – it's

bad. [...] And they [Jobcentre Plus] don't make it any better; they're making me really ill. (2013)

Chloe recognised that the pressures of the Jobcentre Plus 'were adding more stress,' contributing to her feeling even more unwell. With the JSA focussing on returning to work, her mental health and lack of self-confidence did not seem to be understood or sufficiently addressed:

They want me to go on, like, [courses](#) to learn how to do it [I.T.] and to put me CV out there. But if you haven't worked for, like, God, five or six years, it's, it's hard. It's, it's nerve-racking to go back out to work. (2013)

Chloe did not yet feel ready or able to work and was hopeful that her application for [Employment and Support Allowance](#) (ESA) would be successful. She anticipated that, unlike her experience of the Jobcentre Plus, it would mean dealing with 'people who have got a little bit more understanding and not just sat there at a desk doing what they've been told to do' (2013). Chloe considered how benefit changes impacted more negatively on single parents, asking 'who'd organise looking after the kids? [...] it's hard.' (2013). She did not believe that the Government did enough to help to make real change possible, and gave an example of how difficult it was to be a single mother on benefits:

I have to save meals for me kids. [...] And if they don't eat something, if they haven't picked at it, I'll eat theirs, [...] it's not all the time that I go without, but most of the time I go without so that my kids can feed. [...] I've stolen from Co-op [...] I've asked other people if they can give them their tea. (2013)

The last decade has been turbulent for Chloe. She was with an 'abusive partner,' suffered a 'nervous breakdown' and 'ended up getting evicted' from her home. She 'had to get the social services to come and take [her] kids' and they 'went to go live with their nanna and grandad' (2023) for a

time. Chloe has now been settled in a council house for eight years (since 2015) and has her youngest child, who is now 16, living with her. She pointed out the faults with the house:

I've got holes in me ceilings and that, and they want to come and plaster over it but it's black mould. Aren't they supposed to treat it first before they put plaster over it? [...] I don't know what to do about it because I'm poorly. I'm depressed out of my mind. I just lay in bed. I don't know what to do about it.
(2023)

Chloe shared that although the 'house has been tough,' life is a bit easier now that the children are older. Her son moved away, but her daughter, she describes as the 'same as me. She doesn't really have many friends. She stays in bed all t' time, or she's at college. It's lonely' (2023).

Although enrolled on a health and social care college course, her daughter also 'struggles with her own mental health.' Chloe feels 'bad for her' and shares that 'I feel like I let her down' (2023) but, as with others in this report, is finding it hard to get support for her daughter or for herself.

Chloe has not worked at all over the past ten years. She has recently started drinking again and admits to struggling with alcohol for years now. Chloe describes a typical day:

I wake up at whatever time I want. I go downstairs if I've got any, like, I'll get a drink. If I've got money I'll get dressed, go to t' shop, get a drink, come back, lay in bed, watch me videos. Talk to [my daughter] a bit or get her off to college. That's it. Order a takeaway, go back to bed. (2023)

Chloe experienced what she describes as a forced [migration](#) onto Universal Credit (UC) in 2021, saying 'They made me. It was such a shock. I didn't have no money for ages' (2023). She feels very negatively about UC and says that it is detrimental to anyone's mental health because communication with the DWP is so difficult:

... the system is at – it doesn't make no sense. You know, it's, it's frustrating, and then you can't get through to 'em, and then when you do get through to 'em, they don't even help you. They don't even know what they're doing. (2023)

Even when desperate and with 'no money', she feels she is ignored, and that 'they don't care ... it's a job to them' (2023). She receives a bit extra for her limited capacity to work and also receives the lowest rate of PIP in recognition of her enduring mental health and substance misuse issues. When asked where she might envision herself being in five years' time, by which time she will be 48, Chloe responds, 'I'll probably be like this until I die in me bed. I've got no hopes for the future right now [...] I think a lot of people are t' same' (2023).

Chloe has brought up her children whilst battling with substance use and mental health issues. She has encountered a punitive social security system, and has not been able to access effective support for the everyday challenges she faces, and specifically for her chronic and severe mental health and substance misuse issues. The everyday realities for Chloe are incredibly bleak, and look likely to remain so, a result of a collision of individual struggles and an absence of effective state support.

5. What support? Failing to protect and support those who need it most

A number of themes have been identified through the six accounts included in this report. These can be grouped into three key areas: difficulties with (returning to) work; negative experiences of the Jobcentre Plus, including the sanction regime; and a lack of available services or appropriate support from the Conservative Government.

5.1 *Work-first: But where's the support?*

First, it was notable that transitions into work have been in spite of, not because of, the Jobcentre Plus or work programmes. In the case of Susan, the work programme placement failed to materialise and when she used her initiative to find TA work, she was actively discouraged from doing so, and felt she was being steered in an unsuitable direction. Susan was not the only single parent who was restricted by both a lack of workplace flexibility and a lack of understanding from Jobcentre Plus advisers. For instance, Chloe wanted to know who would support her with childcare so she could work, and Rosie found it impossible to work more hours until her son was significantly older, despite enrolling him in as many breakfast and after-school clubs as possible.

While many employers benefit from a flexible workforce, for jobseekers – particularly single parents or people with health conditions, such as Isobella's – there was found to be a lack of flexibility with regards to their health or childcare needs. In addition, even when job seeking was successful, it did not always pay. Rosie, Robert and Susan continued to struggle on low or irregular wages, requiring Housing Benefit or UC to top up their incomes. Furthermore, the cycle of unstable, precarious work that Robert found himself in, resulted in poverty and a recurrent need for social security.

5.2 *Punitive encounters: Experiences at the Jobcentre Plus*

Second, contact with the Jobcentre Plus was described by all six participants as often being one or more of the following: stressful, unpleasant, unsupportive, unclear, and humiliating. Robert's account revealed how punitive, rather than helpful, relationships developed between adviser and claimant and the extent to which conditionality operates to govern encounters in very negative ways. Conditionality has a corrosive effect on relationships between claimants and advisers and is

thus counter-productive. While Robert felt angry and annoyed, Chloe felt increasingly unwell, to the point that she could no longer attend the Jobcentre Plus in person at all.

Sanctions function as punishment for failing to meet certain conditions. Adrian attributes being sanctioned on multiple occasions to increased debt, the development of mental health issues, and homelessness. Robert also experienced stress and homelessness due to sanctions and an irregular income; and despite having two small children, Chloe was sanctioned for between four to eight weeks for non-attendance at a meeting, without any empathy for her single parent status or fragile mental state. The threat of sanctions was enough to deter Susan, Rosie and Isobella from risking making any mistakes, but it also established an unnecessarily fearful and unpleasant environment within which to navigate the support they needed, and to which they were entitled. Against these everyday realities, it is almost impossible to understand the Conservative Government's dogged devotion to sanctions, and the most recent pledges to toughen the regime further, an approach which proceeds very much in spite of the available evidence base.

5.3 Living with a failing welfare state

What is also very clear from across the six accounts shared here is the negative consequences of our threadbare public services infrastructure and the resultant holes in key services. In particular, there was a lack of mental health support and difficulties with accessing appropriate health services when needed. For example, Adrian only received a diagnosis and support for his mental health once he was in prison; Susan has not received adequate mental health provision for herself or her daughter, and their home life together continues to be a huge struggle now her daughter is an adult.

The participants' collective stories suggest that politicians are out of touch with the lived realities of those at the sharp end of a punitive welfare system. Stigma is continually reinforced through politicians' negative portrayals of benefit claimants without, as Rosie discussed, any consideration of individual circumstances. This feeds into how people see themselves, and leads some people to internalise the negative rhetoric. For instance, Isobella, who had previously worked for many years but had become ill and eventually disabled, was made to feel like a '*useless scrounger*' (2012) at a time she most needed compassion and support.

6. An agenda for change: starting to correct a damaging decade

In this working paper, we have reflected on the past decade through the accounts of six people at the sharp end of the successive rounds of cuts and 'reforms'. Their everyday experiences, and battles to secure what little support they are entitled to, speaks to the urgent need for real, meaningful policy change.

Action is desperately needed to repair our broken social security system, and to strengthen our over-stretched and under-funded public services infrastructure. With the change of Government, there is an opportunity for a new approach, which better engages with the research evidence, and seeks to provide meaningful support.

Below we set out a broad direction of change. There is a need to:

- Invest in social security as a force for good, recognising that it should be a central part of our welfare state. Here, we can learn from the [Scottish Social Security](#) system that has developed devolved social security benefits which are underpinned by a set of key principles, including the importance of seeing social security as

an investment and prioritising dignified and respectful treatment for claimants of social security.

- Recognise and value caring and parenting roles and their associated labour, with implications for the design of social security policies and the importance of moving away from a narrow 'work-first approach' to welfare.
- Redesign employment support by rethinking welfare conditionality, removing sanctions' destructive effects on people's lives and the damage they do to encounters between claimants and Jobcentre Plus advisers.
- Reframe political and public conversations about poverty and 'welfare' to shift it away from harmful discourses and negative portrayals of benefit claimants.
- Move away from a work-first and work-more approach and instead seek to provide opportunities for people to find work that is suitable and meaningful to them.
- Address the broader prevalence of insecure labour and a top-down use of flexibility that reinforces precarity, particularly for those on a low-income.
- Look at the interlocking impacts of withdrawal of wider public services and how the absence of this infrastructure affects everyday existence, including for instance, high private rents and a lack of social housing.
- Acknowledge the extent and nature of distrust and disillusionment with politicians, and look to develop more participatory approaches to policymaking, which work with and alongside the realities of people's lives.

We recognise that this is an ambitious – some might say – unrealistic agenda for policy change, and one that is not well-aligned with the policies currently being proposed by any of the main political parties. However, it

is the direction of travel required, and we want to set out what is necessary, and not what feels possible, following the call to do just that from Ruth Levitas.

Saying that, we would also like to propose some key priorities for the newly elected Labour Government, and five immediate actions they could take to start the work of reimagining social security, and building an infrastructure where people have a chance to fulfil their ambitions and combine their paid employment with their parenting and caring responsibilities.

Five immediate Policy Fixes that the new Government should enact:

- Stop speaking about 'welfare' and start talking about 'social security' as a force for good [this does not even cost anything].
- Abolish benefit sanctions.
- Draw on the wealth of research evidence on the impact and consequences of welfare conditionality as a basis for developing a new approach to the role of conditionality within our social security system.
- Commit to reforming Universal Credit, with a focus on a) addressing issues of adequacy; b) making parenting and care work possible; and c) embedding dignified and respectful treatment (i.e., taking seriously the suitability of trauma-informed approaches (TIA) and initiatives within the DWP).
- Commit to working with and involving those with lived experiences of poverty and social security in policymaking and decisions that directly affect them.

7. Conclusion

The evidence shared in this working paper sets out a clear and persuasive case for change, a case which the new Government should heed. There is

a pressing need to completely transform our welfare state if it is to be made fit for purpose. We need to learn from and listen to the experiences shared here – which show the harms caused when the social security system and public services are simply not able to do their job properly. The creation of a suitable, supportive and compassionate social security system, which reimagines social security as a force for good should be a priority for the new Labour Government. We close with final words from each of the six participants who have, or are still, walking the sharp edge of the UK's social security system:

'I feel like I were just let down. I tried, I did, I did try my hardest for opportunities and that, and just nobody were, like, letting me, give me a chance' (Adrian).

'It is not somewhere that you go to for support; it's somewhere you've got to go to almost beg and plead to have some money' (Rosie).

'You know the help out there is limited and it can be confusing and contradictory, so you know if you make a wrong move then you could lose everything' (Isobella).

'They shouldn't be able to turn round and say, "Right, you – you're nowt"' (Robert).

'I managed to move house, and I've been independent, as well. But, then of course, now, many people are struggling with the cost-of-living' (Susan).

'You're out here, and you're out here on your own. They don't care' (Chloe).

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