



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

# Independent review of Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions

Government response: Update on  
improvements to communications

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December 2014

## Introduction

Sanctions are a necessary part of the benefits system, encouraging people to engage with the support on offer. Most jobseekers avoid sanctions by following the rules and doing everything they can to find work. In any given month, the vast majority (94%) of claimants are not sanctioned. In the first six months of this year, there were around 53,000 fewer sanctions than in the same period last year.

Matthew Oakley's independent review of sanctions, published in July 2014, endorsed the important role sanctions play in the benefits system, but stated that:

*'more needs to be done to help the most vulnerable. The recommendations in my review will ensure that all claimants know when and why a sanction will be applied and give them the information they need to challenge that decision and claim the financial help that they might need'.*

The Department for Work and Pensions accepted all recommendations and began implementation immediately. The Department is going beyond the review's remit by looking at sanctions communications for all Jobseeker's Allowance claimants, as well as for Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit. This update provides an overview of progress already made, and outlines further important work to be completed in 2015.

## Progress since the review

1. We carried out **our own detailed analysis** of sanctions communications. As well as auditing and prioritising key communications products, we spoke extensively to claimants and stakeholders to understand their perceptions and experiences, and analysed operational data to identify the most important points in the claimant journey.
2. We have made **sanctions information more accessible**. In July, we published a clear English guide to JSA sanctions on GOV.UK. This helps claimants understand how to avoid having their benefits stopped, and provides clear information on challenging decisions and accessing hardship payments. It also advises claimants to inform their local authority if they have been sanctioned, as an extra safeguard to ensure their housing benefit is not inadvertently stopped (alongside an IT process which notifies local authorities).

We have since worked with claimants, stakeholders and staff to create a revised version which uses design and case studies to simplify more complex elements.



[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/379070/jobseekers-allowance-sanctions-dwpcf15.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/379070/jobseekers-allowance-sanctions-dwpcf15.pdf)

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Government response: Update on improvements to communications

We are now building this clearer language and design into other products. We have also improved the quality and prominence of wider GOV.UK information on sanctions.

We aim to further increase accessibility of sanctions information: stakeholder feedback suggests that many claimants will seek information only when their benefit has already been stopped. In early 2015, we will test options to provide simple, preventative messages earlier in the claimant journey, such as online videos. We will also be building greater understanding among vulnerable groups: for example, we are working with Mencap to produce 'Easy Read' communications guides to sanctions and the claimant commitment.

3. The Oakley Review highlighted that too many claimants are sanctioned because they don't engage with important information early enough. We engage with claimants on Day One through the claimant interview, and with their Claimant Commitment which informs them about sanctions. Furthermore, we are continuing to look at how we can encourage more people to open important letters, explore the potential of other communications channels, and ensure that information itself is accessible and engaging. This work is identifying which approaches are most likely to prompt the right claimant behaviour.

In 2014, we began trialling **different envelopes and delivery methods**, and will continue to build evidence of what works throughout 2015. We have also examined detailed insight from industry experts, including the Direct Marketing Association and Royal Mail, and are drawing on the experience of local authorities, banks and utility companies.

While letters will remain the most secure channel for sensitive information, **alternative channels** such as email could provide effective prompts and reminders. We have used communications industry planning tools to identify channel preferences of key claimant groups. We have also improved our systems' ability to capture email addresses, and will build on 2014 email trials with further channel tests next year.

**Improving content** is also critical. We have used behavioural insight, copywriting and design expertise to make communications clearer and more motivating. Communications emphasises the benefits of engaging with Jobcentres as well as the consequences of not doing so - consistent with our view that the vast majority of claimants are committed to finding work and doing the right thing. We have already designed a significant number of Universal Credit letters, and are testing and improving content in Jobseeker's Allowance letters.

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# Summary

DWP has taken decisive steps to address the communications issues Matthew Oakley outlined in his review. Significant progress has already been made, and through a sustained effort we will ensure that our communications build understanding, support a positive claimant experience, and drive the right behaviour. With additional capability now in place, DWP will maintain momentum in improving communications into 2015.