

SOCIAL SECURITY
ADVISORY COMMITTEE

In-work progression and Universal Credit

**A study by the Social Security Advisory Committee
Occasional Paper No. 19**

November 2017

About this report

This project was conducted as part of the Social Security Advisory Committee's Independent Work Programme, under which the Committee investigates pertinent issues relating to the operation of the benefits system.

We are grateful for the assistance of our secretariat who prepared the paper for us, and to officials from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) who provided factual information. As ever, we are also grateful to our extensive stakeholder community for their active engagement with this project.

However, the views expressed and recommendations reached in the report are solely those of the Committee.

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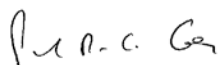
Foreword

The system of benefit provision in the UK is in the process of fundamental change. Universal Credit is scheduled to become the single nationwide income-related benefit for people of working age, whether in paid work or not. While there are currently serious concerns being expressed in Parliament and elsewhere about aspects of its delivery, Universal Credit is set to be the dominant landmark on the benefit skyline for many years to come. Its roll-out is coinciding with a dramatic growth in part-time and more flexible patterns of working. So it is clear that an opportunity has arisen for Universal Credit to play a crucial role in shaping social and employment policy as well as supporting those on low incomes.

Benefit provision in the UK has always been called upon to address the financial needs of those who alternate between spells of worklessness and periods on low earnings. The Government's aim is to reduce the number of homes where that cycle operates, and to make the social security system easier for claimants to manage when it does.

A key aspect of that challenge is how the system supports in-work benefit claimants. Working Tax Credits recipients (who necessarily work more than 16 hours a week) typically have no ongoing engagement with HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), or any active help or expectation that they will increase their earnings. However, in the future the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) work coaches will be exploring with claimants ways to move them towards increased employment with little or no need for a benefit top up. The test for work coaches will be to balance the aim of supporting working claimants into more, and/or better paid, work with a sensitive understanding of an individual's capabilities and circumstances, including the constraints of the local labour market.

This report seeks to identify and grapple with some of the complex issues which arise in such cases. There is an awareness within DWP of the need to pick a way through these new challenges with care. We present this report to the Department to help inform the development of an effective in-work support regime for both work coaches and claimants.



Paul Gray
Chair

1. Executive Summary

There are 5.7 million people in low paid work. Some of these will have higher earning partners, therefore it is difficult to be precise about how many of this group will be on Universal Credit when it is fully rolled out. However, we do know that:

- in 2015–16, three million in-work families received tax credit payments totalling £20.5 billion; and
- as at 10 August 2017, of the 590,000 people in receipt of Universal Credit, 39 per cent (230,000) were in employment.

The Government's ambition is to enable many of the people in these groups to earn more in order to increase their household incomes and to reduce their receipt of Universal Credit, or even to earn enough to leave it completely.

It aims to do so in a number of ways including by:

- extending to people on low paid work similar requirements and support to those which have in the past only applied to unemployed claimants;¹ and
- working with employers at both national and local level to understand their requirements and assist them in offering progression to low paid employees.

This is unprecedented and needs to be done well if the potential benefits are to be realised. We therefore welcome DWP's adoption of a cautious 'test and learn' approach and, in particular, the Department's Randomised Control Trial to test the impact of different frequencies of work coach intervention.

We also welcome the Department's ambition of working with employers to understand and respond to different local and sectoral employer needs. A successful in-work service will need a three-way relationship between Universal Credit recipients, the state and employers. We also trust that DWP will continue to work closely with other Government departments – in particular tying the development of the in-work service into the Government's industrial strategy by emphasising the importance of raising productivity in low paid sectors. However, this reports focuses on the issues which are more in DWP's direct control, in particular on opportunities to develop and refine its approach to in-work progression.

¹ People working less than 16 hours a week who are required to look for work as a condition of receiving benefit.

Testing a broader range of interventions

There is very little evidence as to what can be done to advance earnings progression – either in the UK or in other countries. This means that DWP will need to test a broad range of approaches. Some of these will need to be centrally directed randomised control trials, but learning from the experience of individual Jobcentres is also important. We believe that work coaches are well placed to identify potential interventions that might serve claimants² well and meet Departmental aims. Jobcentres should be enabled to define and test their own initiatives, taking into consideration local knowledge such as emerging local labour market conditions, but crucially within a structured evaluation framework.

Understanding and reacting to the needs of claimants and employers

A much richer understanding of those currently in low paid work needs to be developed quickly. The Department's Randomised Control Trial has mostly involved single childless people who have progressed from unemployment into low paid work. The challenges and solutions might be different when dealing with people already in work who move on to Universal Credit because they have children, a change in household status or because their earnings have fallen. It will only be as existing tax credit claimants are migrated to Universal Credit that the Department will see significant numbers of claimants for whom the in-work service will apply.

In-work progression currently depends heavily on the expertise and creativity of individual work coaches. It is important that this is not undermined. However, it is likely to be more effective if they have a range of tools to support them. In particular we think it will be important that the Department has at its disposal more wide-ranging, quantified information about claimants, possibly including motivation and aspirations, to build up a more detailed picture of each claimant's circumstances.

Getting Delivery right

In designing Universal Credit, the Government is trying to implement its objective of making work pay. It also acknowledges that complexity, unpredictability and poor administration can deter people from getting a job. We have seen a number of areas where complexity, unpredictability and administrative delays still exist. These include requiring working people to travel to offices to provide evidence on child care costs, delays in applying benefit sanctions, the flexibility of (and access to) its digital service, changes in conditionality regimes which lag behind a claimant's current circumstances, and the complexity of the conditionality and earnings rules for couples. There are also areas where greater policy clarification is needed if work coaches are to

² For the purposes of this report, the Committee has adopted DWP's terminology of 'claimants' for in-work recipients of Universal Credit.

exercise their discretion consistently. Claimants and their representative groups will undoubtedly see glitches in the system that hinder a claimant from advancing in work. Existing relationships with such groups could be usefully exploited by the Department to garner more information.

Recommendations

We therefore make the following main recommendations. DWP should:

- Test a much broader range of interventions, including those identified by work coaches in local Jobcentres for the full range of working claimants.
- Establish a formal evaluation framework that enables Jobcentres to carry out this testing while drawing on the Department's central analytical capacity and its access to high quality data to ensure rigorous evaluation.
- Quickly develop an in-depth understanding of current in-work tax credit claimants and their prospects for advancement in hours and/or pay, to feed into the plan for the migration of tax credit claimants to Universal Credit.
- Adopt a data driven approach to support segmentation, for example segment Universal Credit Claimants for the best form of support using a range of personal and, potentially, psychometric data.
- Urgently identify and tackle some of the operational complexities that can present obstacles to in-work progression.
- Develop a better 'it pays to progress' calculator, in which work coaches and claimants have confidence.
- Clarify policy in a number of areas – for example on the variety of circumstances where claimants are working part time in order to study, re-train, or pursue other interests – so that work coaches are able to exercise their discretion with a measure of consistency.

1. Introduction

The proportion of working age people in the UK in paid work is at an all-time high. This is welcome. However, a high proportion of those workers are in low paid employment.³ Just over one in five employees (5.7 million individuals) in Great Britain were in low paid work during 2015. Many within this group will be providing the main income for low income families. A particularly pressing problem for many is its persistence. In 2002, three-quarters of low earners remained on low pay a decade later. With evidence suggesting that being low paid can increase the risk of subsequent periods of worklessness, low pay presents a fairly wide-spread and deep-rooted problem in the UK.⁴ Tackling low pay would not only help those trapped on it, but also reduce social security expenditure.⁵

Universal Credit simplifies the benefit system by replacing six means-tested working age benefits.⁶ It is designed to help those moving between out-of-work benefits and income by integrating in and out-of-work support. No longer will an existing benefit award be terminated, and the claimant required to make a new claim for a different benefit, when they move into paid work or increase their hours beyond the current 16 hours a week threshold. Instead – unless increased earnings⁷ remove their benefit eligibility altogether – their benefit payments should simply be adjusted by the Department as a change of circumstances.

For people in work the Department says that Universal Credit will enable them to increase their earnings progressively by:

- removing perverse incentives which encourage individuals to adopt certain patterns of low-hours' work;

³ Low paid work is typically defined as hourly earnings less than two thirds of the median hourly wage.

⁴ Clarke, S and D'Arcy, C (2016) [Resolution Foundation Low Pay Britain](#); Hurrell, A (2013) [Starting out or getting stuck?](#); and Thompson, S (2015) [Low pay no pay cycle](#)

⁵ In 2015-16, 3.0 million in-work families were recorded as receiving tax credits of £20.5 billion. [Child and Working Tax Credits statistics: finalised annual awards - 2015 to 2016](#)

⁶ Universal Credit is being introduced gradually across England, Scotland and Wales by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Full implementation is currently scheduled to have been completed by 2021. In Northern Ireland, the roll-out of Universal Credit commenced on 27 September 2017, with all new claims due to be taken on by September 2018. Universal Credit replaces six means-tested working age benefits: Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit, Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit.

⁷ For simplicity we refer to earnings throughout this report, but it should be noted that other forms of income – for example interest and dividend income – are also taken into account.

- introducing a taper whereby Universal Credit payments are reduced at a consistent and predictable rate of 63 per cent as earnings increase; and
- providing working parents with up to 85 per cent of their eligible childcare costs.⁸

Alongside these structural changes, a different approach to conditionality is being introduced. Universal Credit will provide the opportunity to make payment of benefit to people on low earnings conditional upon the claimant fulfilling tailored work search and work preparation requirements set out in an agreement between the claimant and the Department. Currently, claimants working sufficient hours to qualify for tax credits are not subject to any such conditionality.

The strategy DWP has announced for effective in-work progression is:

- identifying the most effective method and level of support that will help people in work;
- understanding how employers can best support progression and how employer best practice can be promoted;
- understanding the effect of mandating compliance, setting requirements and imposing conditionality. The Department is currently undertaking a large scale Randomised Control Trial (RCT) to test a slightly modified version of its existing support for out of work claimants at varying levels of frequency. The trial is expected to provide useful information – albeit with some limitations – which will feed into the design of an enhanced service;⁹ and
- in due course identifying the most effective financial levers to drive claimant behaviour without substantial adviser intervention.

The scale of the challenge is enormous. At full roll-out, the number of households predicted to receive Universal Credit in which someone is in work is three million. The Government estimates that around one million of these people will come into its new in-work conditionality service by 2021.^{10 11}

⁸ The upper limits of eligible childcare costs are: £760.42 per month for one child; and £1,303.57 per month for two children or more.

⁹Details of the trial are available [here](#). The full evaluation will follow in 2018.

¹⁰ Work and Pensions Committee (2016): [Inquiry on in-work progression](#)

¹¹ See annex A for a breakdown of the conditionality groups and the requirements of claimants in each group.

A key ingredient to any effective in-work service is the ongoing relationship between the designated DWP work coach and the claimant. Agreeing a commitment that will stretch claimants within realistic bounds requires deep understanding and familiarity with the claimant's circumstances. In some cases a work coach will need to acknowledge that a particular claimant is unlikely to progress to a point where they are independent of Universal Credit, at least in the short term.¹²

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Labour Market Outlook, along with other international literature, suggests that it is unprecedented internationally for a public employment service to provide this level of support to people in paid work.¹³ Having embarked in recent years on increasing efforts to move those on incapacity benefits into, or nearer, the labour market, on top of its longstanding role in supporting unemployed people into work, providing an in-work service represents a considerable change – and challenge – for the Department.

Additionally, in 2016, while recognising that this shift “*holds the potential to be the most significant welfare reform since 1948*”,¹⁰ the House of Commons' Work and Pensions Committee highlighted the considerable new territory still to be covered before a successful Universal Credit in-work progression service could be said to be on course for delivery.

One particular area of concern emerging from the inquiry was that the Department could be underpinning their in-work progression service with an assumption that the in-work support provided by work coaches will be little more than an extension of what they already deliver. Some of the inquiry's expert witnesses, with experience in supporting low-paid workers, have described this as a “*very different intervention*” and endorse the view that support should be tailored to the needs and circumstances of the claimant.¹⁴

Having considered the evidence presented to the Work and Pensions Committee, its Chair concluded that “*for in-work progression to succeed, Jobcentre Plus work coaches will need to be a new kind of public servant, possessing new skills and operating on a new agenda.*”¹⁵ As yet, we cannot judge whether such a big change in skills is needed, and work coaches we have

¹² Chapter 3 of this report outlines further details on the Department's Randomised Control Trial and includes the exceptions criteria which explain the circumstances where claimants are excluded from the in-work service.

¹³ OECD Labour Market outlook (2015).

¹⁴ Work and Pensions Committee (2016): [Inquiry on in-work progression](#)

¹⁵ Operating on a new agenda includes extended discretionary powers available to work coaches e.g. in determining the content of a claimant commitment.

spoken to were positive about their new role in the in-work progression service, seeing it as a natural extension of their work with unemployed people.

This report examines some of the issues highlighted by these and other bodies. We also provide a broad assessment of the progress being made by the Department in terms of the 'in-work' support being provided, and explore options for future development of an enhanced in-work service. In particular we have:

- examined what is currently being done for working Universal Credit claimants by exploring the detailed support currently being provided by work coaches in some Jobcentres;
- reviewed the design of DWP's RCT and evaluation strategy, considering whether there are opportunities to do more;
- identified the main challenges of bringing about greater in-work progression and explored different ways in which the Department could strengthen its in-work support offer;
- navigated this broad and complex subject area by assessing it against the Department's own stated objectives for Universal Credit, particularly the key objective of tackling the problems of poor work incentives and complexity within the current system of benefits and tax credits.¹⁶

Our findings on the potential strengths, opportunities, risks and weaknesses of an in-work service are inevitably tentative given the current state of the roll-out of Universal Credit, which is now not due to be fully implemented until 2022. This means that there is little experience of in-work progression to draw on and that which is available predominantly relates to single people moving from unemployment into work.

In the course of this review we have consulted a range of stakeholders including DWP work coaches, employers and policy specialists about their views and experiences. We have also spoken to a very small number of claimants. We are grateful to everyone who has contributed to this work and provided additional evidence from a range of perspectives.

¹⁶ DWP (Dec 2012): [Universal Credit Evaluation](#)

2. Existing evidence on in-work progression – what does the research say?

Evidence on what works in terms of supporting in-work progression is very limited – both within the UK and internationally.¹⁷ The House of Commons' Work and Pensions Select Committee acknowledged this point:

...there are no comparable international precedents on which to draw, aside from some instances in Canada and the Netherlands of some state support to increase earnings for small cohorts of people.

**Work and Pensions Committee
In-Work Progression¹⁴**

Shortly after its report was published, however, results of a relevant large scale randomised control trial in the United States were released. WorkAdvance, a multi-site trial run by MDRC¹⁸ tested a sector-based approach to the earnings progression of low paid workers in information technology (IT), environmental remediation (i.e. reducing radiation exposure from contaminated soil, ground water and surface water), transportation, manufacturing and health care.¹⁹ The progression support offered by WorkAdvance centred on formal training and the gaining of industry-recognised certifications.

Participants received job training and work readiness preparation tailored to their needs. The provider also continued to work with the participants and with employer partners to help them retain their jobs and advance in their careers – and providing rapid re-employment support if necessary.

By comparing WorkAdvance participants to a control group, the evaluators were able to demonstrate that it was possible to achieve significant earnings progression. Although there was significant variation among sectors and sites, participants were able to earn an average of 14 per cent more than they otherwise would have earned two years after they entered the programme (there was a variation ranging from zero earnings gain at one site to a 26 per cent increase at the most effective site).

It is worth emphasising that one of the main findings of WorkAdvance was that the benefits to participants of sector based training and support, albeit in

¹⁷ A full list of the literature and published evidence consulted can be found at annex E.

¹⁸ Previously known as the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation.

¹⁹ Further information about this trial can be found at annex C.

relation to a limited set of industries, can take at least a year to emerge. Where the delivery partner was inexperienced in providing in-work training, any impact took even longer to be felt. These lessons need to be taken on board in the UK context.

In the UK, DWP is one of the lead producers and commissioners of research into in-work progression. While the evidence is limited, a number of studies which touch on various issues relating to progression have been published. The rest of this chapter outlines evidence that is relevant to development of this policy area, focused in particular on capability, barriers, matching claimants to vacancies and what little we know about employers and their perspective on progression.

Relationship between capability and progression potential

Employment Retention and Advancement 2003 (ERA) was a large scale randomised control trial undertaken in the UK between 2003-2007 which included a sub-sample of claimants who were in-work.²⁰ They were provided with in-work support and the impact of this support on their earnings was compared against a control group. Findings from ERA suggested that sustained earnings progression is associated with those who had achieved a higher level of educational attainment. During the WorkAdvance trial, people applying to participate were screened before enrolment to ensure they could take advantage of the skills training. Although there has not been much other research in this area, the finding from ERA and the approach used in the successful WorkAdvance trial suggest – perhaps unsurprisingly – that individuals with higher levels of capability are more able to progress up the earnings ladder.

This is consistent with the idea that progression could be related to some previously untapped potential. The widespread view that those with an obvious potential to earn more can be more or less left to find their own way in the working world needs to be questioned. Research which has looked at the rate at which out-of-work claimants move off JSA shows that even those with high prior academic attainment remain on benefit for longer if the intensity of their signing-on regime is reduced.²¹ It seems reasonable to conclude from that research that the same principle may well extend to in-work progression. In other words, claimants who would appear to have the qualifications and potential to progress in work with the minimum of DWP engagement, may still

²⁰ 2011 DWP [Employment Retention and Advancement \(ERA\) demonstration: Delivery, take-up, and outcomes of in-work training support for lone parents](#)

²¹ DWP (2006) *Fortnightly signing trials*

need a degree of prompting and support to set them on a trajectory which would take them off Universal Credit altogether. The Department must continue to strike a balance between identifying those who are most likely to respond positively to in-work support while limiting spending on those who would go on to progress naturally without any intervention.

A low level of educational attainment can, for example, be a significant barrier to in-work progression. Unlocking latent potential effectively is the obvious key to progress in such cases. We would therefore encourage DWP, in consultation with the Department for Education,²² to consider the degree to which appropriate access to existing records on the educational attainment of Universal Credit claimants might be beneficial in addressing that barrier.

Understanding other barriers

It is not unreasonable to assume that many of the barriers to people increasing their earnings will be similar to the barriers to moving from unemployment into work – and this was reinforced by our focus groups with work coaches. As there has already been a great deal of research into these barriers, it seems the Department's existing evidence base already goes some way towards informing the evidence base on barriers to progression.²³

However, some barriers take a different form or a different weight with people who are in paid work. One example is childcare provision. Its availability is a common obstacle for out-of-work claimants, whereas for in-work claimants where childcare arrangements are often in place already, the issue is more likely to be the flexibility of that provision.

Another very important factor is personal views about raising children. Some evidence suggests that some tax credit claimants with children do not want to progress in terms of increasing their weekly hours of work. The desire for one parent to be the primary child-carer in a family, and devote the majority of their time to this role, was a key driver of work decisions in low-income couple households. Some families hold more traditional views about the father being the bread-winner and the mother caring for the children at home. Research also suggests that some mothers who are, or could be, second earners have said that their work choices are driven more by their desire to achieve a work/life balance.²⁴

²² Along with Education Scotland, the Department for Education in Northern Ireland and the Department for Education and Skills in Wales

²³ DWP (2011) [Families and work: Revisiting barriers to employment](#)

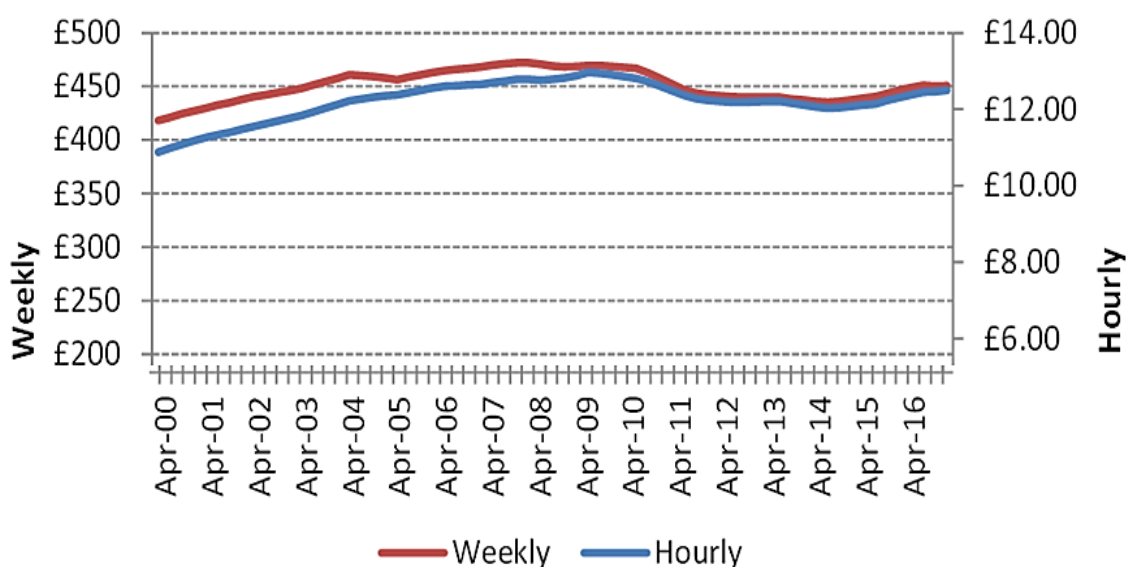
²⁴ Personal Finance Research Centre, Bristol University (2014) [Making decisions about work in low income couple households: final report to the Child Poverty Unit](#)

The importance of understanding individual employment sectors

Knowledge of different employment sectors is important if the aim of the in-work service is to identify attractive vacancies compatible with the claimant’s abilities and constraints. Between 2014 and 2016, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) was funded by DWP and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to explore progression in the hospitality and retail sector.²⁵ These two sectors represent 7 per cent and 15 per cent respectively of all UK jobs²⁶; they are also largely low-paid jobs. UKCES collaborated with employers from these sectors and generated insight into how progression pathways could be established for people with aspirations to progress in these two sectors. Working with employers to map out career pathways is a good first step in understanding what the employer wants from their side of the match.

The barriers for employers

The Department is attempting to intervene with earnings progression at a time when wage growth is generally poor. Figure 1, below, shows UK median weekly earnings and hourly wage growth respectively for the last 16 years.



Source: 2016 Q3 Scorecard from the [Resolution Foundation's Earnings Outlook](#). Based on ASHE and LFS data

Hourly wage growth has, on average, either been in decline or negligible for most years since the mid-2000s. Over the past two years at least, weekly earnings growth – which has been better than most other European countries

²⁵ UKCES (2016) Evaluation [Futures Programme](#)

²⁶ ONS (2017) [JOBS02: Workforce jobs by industry](#)

recently – has been driven by an increase in the number of hours people typically work every week.²⁷

We have been told that the barriers preventing employers in the private sector from offering more opportunities for progression included concerns about additional commitments affecting an employee’s availability for work and simply having no additional hours to offer. Some barriers stem from a fundamental issue around the UK’s overall poor productivity performance over the last decade. Without productivity growth, wages stagnate.

Evidence provided to the Work and Pensions Committee’s inquiry into in-work progression in 2016 highlighted, as the DWP acknowledges, that the Department’s planning needed a better understanding of the demand for labour.

Evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee²⁸

It is how we have an employer to employer conversation, which is not just about developing a little toolkit or an app or looking at what one or two employers do. It is about sectoral approaches and it is about talking to employers in their own language about how you can make your workplace more effective, increase the performance of your business, grow your business and how you bring your low-paid employees along with you in that. There is some good research about the characteristics of low-paying employers that do progress their staff, and it comes down to things like: culture, management practice, leadership and a sense of senior ownership and so on, and also company size and the sectors they work in, but drawing that together.

Tony Wilson (Director of Policy and Research)
The Learning and Work Institute

WorkAdvance and UKCES Futures were both designed to explore progression issues at a sector level. Zeynep Ton’s *Good Jobs Strategy*²⁹ argues for employers to reconfigure their operations to provide better, more fulfilling jobs, while avoiding a negative impact on customer service or profit margins. UK research into employers and their role in reducing in-work poverty has been published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).

²⁷ The National Living Wage has also been a factor since its introduction on 1 April 2016.

²⁸ [Oral evidence](#) to the Work and Pensions Select Committee on 3 February 2016 (Q 30)

²⁹ ISBN – 10:054411442 (2014), Published by New Harvest

In particular, recently published work on the retail sector explores how the pay of front-line retail workers could be increased without harming businesses.³⁰ This builds on previous work undertaken by JRF, which consolidates evidence on how different Human Resource Management approaches could be used to improve the pay of workers by shedding light on the way organisations function.

In conclusion, the evidence base on which to found an in-work progression service is small although not non-existent. DWP is leading the way in this policy area and other countries will inevitably look to the UK for evidence on what works.

³⁰JRF (2016) [*Improving pay, progression and productivity in the retail sector*](#)

3. What DWP is doing with in-work progression

The Department's aim is to support and encourage Universal Credit claimants in low paid work to earn more, become more self-sufficient and, ultimately, move off Universal Credit altogether.

Working with employers, the Department intends to:

- connect those working low hours with appropriate increased work opportunities;
- align the supply of skilled work-ready claimants to the needs of employers, ensuring better matching of people to jobs; and
- support workers to progress in work through effective matching and skills support, as well as creating a benefits system that does more to encourage progression.

Prior to Universal Credit, there was no requirement or expectation on individuals in low paid work and in receipt of Tax Credits and certain other benefits to progress. Nor was there any penalty for not seeking to do so. That is not the case for Universal Credit claimants. The Department's position is that anyone in receipt of Universal Credit with earnings below a certain threshold and who can reasonably be expected to earn more, should be required to seek opportunities for progression.

Universal Credit earnings and conditionality groups – the rules

...more straightforward for singles

It is not just benefit payments that are adjusted when earnings vary – the level of conditionality placed by the Department on a claimant may also be changed. If, for instance, a single claimant is earning more than the Individual Conditionality Earnings Threshold (CET), currently £1,137 a month for most people, they are placed in the *working enough* - No Work Related Requirements regime with no conditionality.³¹

³¹ The Conditionality Earnings Threshold (CET) ensures that claimants earning above a certain level will not be asked to carry out work-related activity. The CET is calculated on an individual basis, by multiplying the National Minimum Wage (NMW) by the claimant's expected hours. The CET for a household is a combination of the individual expected CET of each of the adults (joint claimants or including an ineligible partner of a claimant) in the household and varies between different households. In a couple household, if one of the

For those earning less than the Individual CET their prescribed relationship with the Department is more nuanced and depends on their personal circumstances as well as their earnings. Annex A shows the different conditionality groups for Universal Credit claimants. The group that has interested us for the purposes of this review are the people who are in the *full conditionality* – All Work Related Requirements group. When they are not in work or earn less than the Individual Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET) (currently £338 per month for a single person; and £541 per month for a couple), they are expected to take intensive action to find work or get more work and, in most cases, keep fortnightly appointments with their work coach.

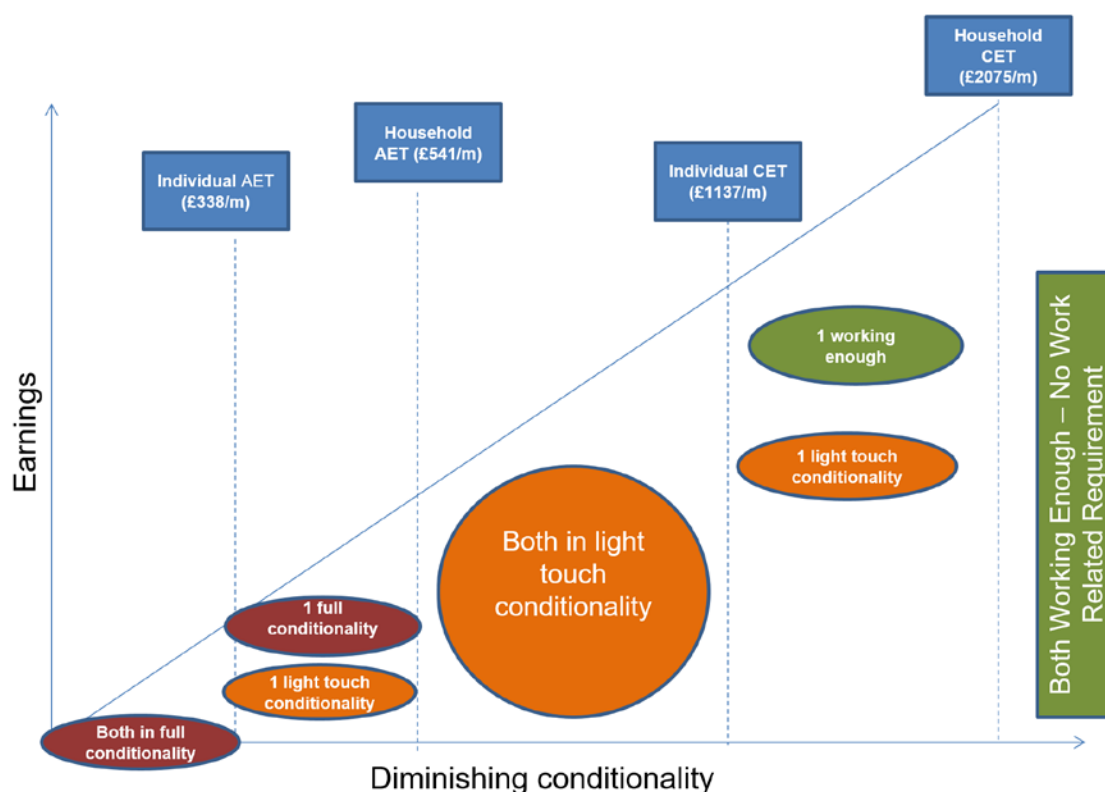
When they earn between these two thresholds they fall into the new *light touch* regime. The intention is that requirements will be placed on these claimants in order to help boost their subsequent earnings. The exact nature of these requirements is yet to be determined with some evidence over frequency of engagement with work coaches currently being gathered. The possibility remains that those who do not carry out any mandatory actions will be at risk of losing benefit.

The treatment of couples is more complicated...

The rules for couples are different as Universal Credit conditionality is based on the personal circumstances of each individual in the couple but at the same time takes into account a couple's combined income. This could complicate things for couples in the light touch group because a change in one partner's earnings can have a bearing on the conditionality group of the other.

The chart below illustrates how lower income couples with household earnings between the Household AET and the Individual CET will both be in the *light touch* regime even if one partner has no earnings. This means they can be in the same conditionality group despite the fact that their earnings patterns are different.

adults earns above the household CET, both claimants are placed in the working enough regime, regardless of whether they are both working or not.



In other circumstances partners in a joint claim can be placed in different conditionality groups. Where a couple's household earnings are below Household AET their conditionality will depend on their individual earnings – if one member earns below the Individual AET then they will be in *full conditionality*, but if their earnings rise above this threshold they are placed in the *light touch* regime.

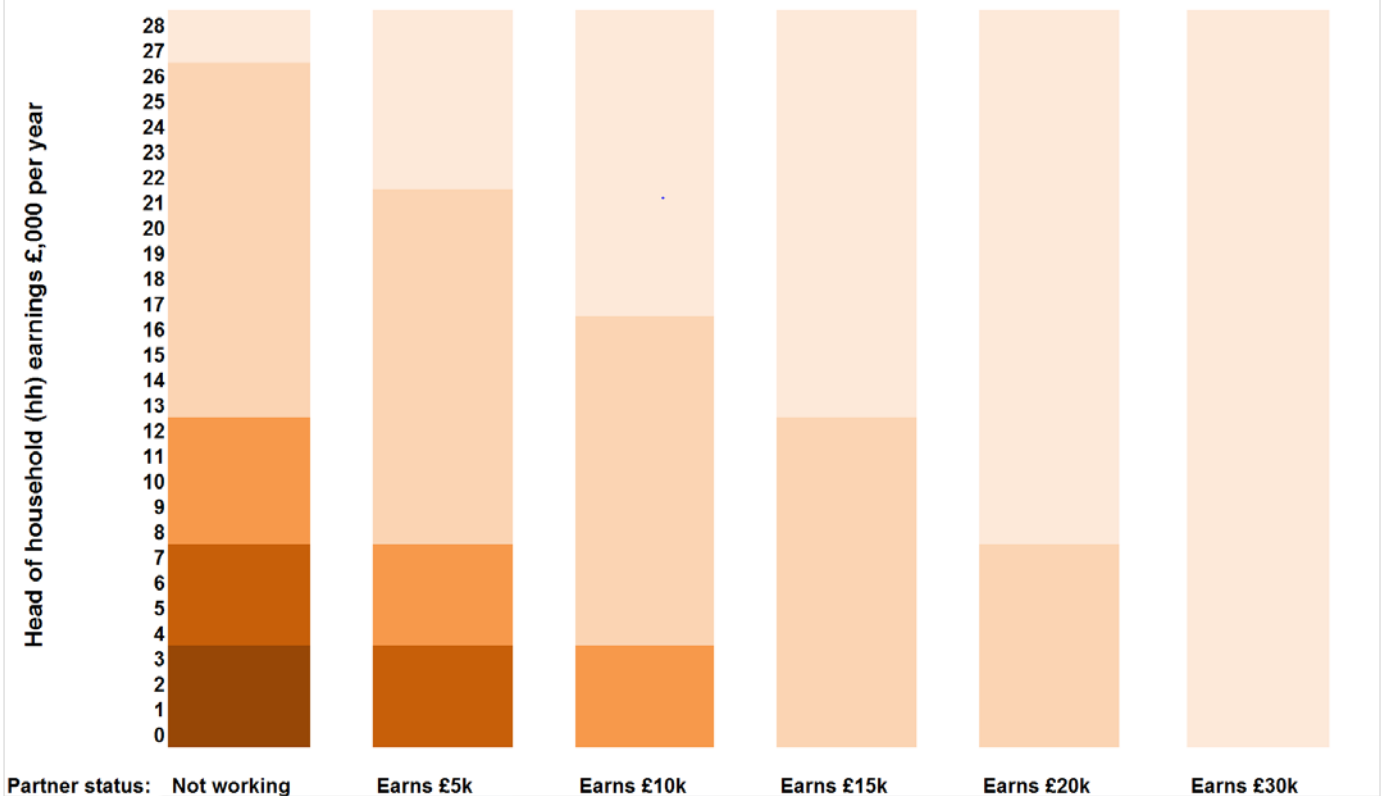
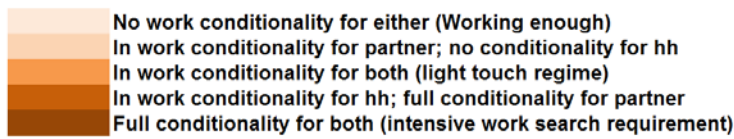
If household earnings are below Household CET, individual earnings are also considered. If one member of the couple earns above the Individual CET then they will be placed in the *working enough* group. But the other member of the couple – who must be earning less than Individual CET – will be subject to conditionality. Communicating this to claimants is likely to be difficult and almost certainly present some challenges for work coaches.

The following chart provides an illustrative worked example to show what would happen in practice to people earning different amounts. In the example couple (with two children older than three years, renting in the private sector at the Local Housing Allowance limit, with stable earnings), their conditionality group outcomes vary according to both of their earnings.

The impact of household earnings on conditionality regimes for couples

Example family

Couple both aged over 25 and under female State Pension Age, 2 children (aged 6 and 12), renting at the LHA limit in the private sector, in an average rent area, all in good health, with non-fluctuating earnings



Developing the programme

The Department has said it is committed to developing its evidence base on how it might most effectively support the in-work progression of low paid workers on Universal Credit. In particular it is seeking to:

- identify the most effective method and level of support;
- understand how employers can support and utilise the in-work progression service;
- compile and promote employer best practice;
- understand the effect of mandating compliance, setting requirements and imposing conditionality; and in due course;

- identify the most effective financial levers to drive claimant behaviour without substantial adviser intervention.

Its approach to developing an in-work support offer for Universal Credit claimants will be heavily reliant upon the outcome of a large RCT delivered by Jobcentre Plus alongside a handful of externally led trials. The Department's published guidance on the in-work conditionality pilots outlines the main trial design as follows: ³²

The RCT randomly assigns eligible Universal Credit recipients into one of three groups, providing different degrees of in-work support and conditionality.

- **Group 1:** claimants meet with their work coach every eight weeks to get support and review mandatory actions agreed in their claimant commitment. These claimants will have access to a flexible time bank of work coach support.
- **Group 2:** claimants have the same set of requirements as Group 1 and access to work coach support, but with a fortnightly review, rather than eight weekly.
- **Group 3:** this group gets the "business as usual" Universal Credit service for people in work currently provided by DWP. This is an initial telephone appointment to establish voluntary actions, and a follow up telephone appointment eight weeks later to consider progress.

As well as testing the impact of frequency of in-work support on claimant earnings, the trial also aims to:

- embed the expectation that claimants take reasonable steps to increase their earnings in return for the support on offer;
- give a clear understanding of what is required from claimants, with regular and frequent engagement with a work coach and delivery of agreed actions in an individually tailored claimant commitment;
- coach claimants to have conversations with their current employer, where possible, about opportunities for more, or better paid, work and, where appropriate, look at wider opportunities for earnings progression;

³² DWP Universal Credit (2016): [In Work Progression Randomised Control Trial](#)

- identify barriers to progression, such as confidence and motivation, skills, or childcare, and direct them to available support; and
- provide supportive but challenging conversations to help guide, steer and motivate claimants to realise their potential and earn above the Universal Credit threshold.

The trial is primarily designed to assess the impact of the frequency of work coach engagement with the claimant, measured by increased earnings. However the Department is also undertaking evaluation research designed to pick up a much broader range of issues, including the content of the support. This means claimants will be asked to pinpoint aspects of work coach support that helped them and others which did not. We also explored these issues in a series of focus groups with work coaches across England and Scotland.

The trial is closely aligned to the roll-out of Universal Credit and will inevitably be weighted towards the more straightforward cases i.e. single claimants without children. However DWP anticipates that the large sample size of the trial should be sufficient to capture more complex claims. For example, a reduction in earnings because of caring responsibilities, or because the employer had to reduce the number of hours on offer. DWP maintains that the trial should be able to capture some more complex family cases as they are migrated from tax credits following a change of circumstance.

4. Our assessment of DWP's in-work progression – what did we find?

This section sets out our analysis of the strengths, opportunities, and weaknesses of DWP's in-work progression support as it currently stands. It is based primarily on discussions with work coaches, policy experts and, to a lesser extent, on meetings with employers. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the revised timetable for Universal Credit roll-out, the Committee's access to in-work claimants was very limited during this project. This means that we have not been able to compare the views of work coaches and policy experts about of the new regime with the perceived experience of claimants.

In the period we conducted our research (May – July 2017), Universal Credit was still in the early days of full national roll out for new claims. There was therefore little experience of in-work progression on which to draw. What information does exist relates to relatively straightforward cases involving single people without dependants, moving from unemployment into work. As the experience of in-work progression for most work coaches was with single, childless claimants, conclusions relating to couples or people with children are difficult to reach. It also meant that work coaches saw in-work progression as the next stage after unemployment (i.e. people potentially on the way up in income/employment terms), with very little experience of people who were on other trajectories.

During our employer research, the extent to which we were able to understand or highlight the wide variation in employer perspectives was limited. These issues are consistent with the challenges faced by other researchers working in this area. As a grasp of the employer perspective is important we are therefore making recommendations which highlight the need for DWP to understand and respond to different sectoral needs and approaches.

Therefore what follows is an early and, to an extent, limited perspective of in-work progression, and our assessment of its strengths, opportunities, risks, and weaknesses.

Strengths and opportunities

The success of the in-work service will depend to a very large extent on the effectiveness of work coaches. Our experience, from discussions with them, has been one of almost universal positivity. We have found them to be committed, able to articulate the aims of the new benefit and confident and creative in operating it. Whether that enthusiasm is sustained over time as caseloads become more onerous remains to be seen, but it is a remarkably

good start. However we should acknowledge at this point that, in other work we have done, some claimants' perceptions of their interactions with Jobcentres have been markedly different from those of work coaches.

The Work and Pensions Select Committee expressed the view that an in-work progression service required a different set of job skills from those involved in working with unemployed people. They highlighted the likelihood that more specialist skills would be required – skills which work coaches with a background in the legacy benefit may not necessarily possess. In contrast work coaches themselves tended to see their role in any in-work progression service as a natural extension of their work with unemployed people. For them the main difference was in developing a knowledge of the individual claimant's skills, aspirations and circumstances, enabling an individualised claimant commitment that the claimant could understand and own to be agreed with relative ease. On the whole they were confident that they could learn enough, on the job, to tackle the new issues which will arise from working with people in work. It is too early to know how far this confidence is justified but, given the scepticism with which established employees in any field often face new ways of working, the signs here are encouraging.

Work coaches seem to be well positioned to pick up when one of their clients lacks confidence or skills to progress in work, or needs support to sustain employment. Although there were some variations, work coaches in the offices we visited appeared to be able to secure access for their claimants to training (most often to get accreditation – for example, in security or construction roles) as well as to mental health support. They were also able to do a lot themselves to provide assistance. In one office a work coach talked about involving one particular claimant she had helped to find work, and who was now well established in her own career, as a mentor to others who were just starting out. Other work coaches reported that some claimants welcomed the fact that, though they were now in work, they could still contact their work coach for advice and support.

We heard that some claimants simply do not want to engage. For example, individuals with a long history of low paid work topped up with a legacy benefit may require greater encouragement to adapt to the requirements of Universal Credit which are very different. In such circumstances, work coaches considered it important to relate in-work support “to their hopes and dreams” – making a tangible link between that support and what it could deliver to the claimant.

In-work progression has the potential to offset one of the risks of Universal Credit – that in the absence of a 16-hour rule dividing claimants into employed

and unemployed, people who would have previously been treated as unemployed by the benefit system might spend longer working for a very few hours each week, with their earnings supplemented by Universal Credit. By way of further mitigation, the Department should examine its available data to establish whether there are any lessons to be learnt from previous experience of moving JSA claimants from below the 16 hour threshold into more hours.

It might also deter fraud by people who were under-reporting their earnings or self-employment income in order to qualify for in-work benefits as well as deter people who were content simply to work part-time with their earnings topped up by benefits. Both of these points were strongly argued by some work coaches.

While some of the employers we spoke to had concerns about potential risks from an in-work service, they also saw opportunities, suggesting, for example:

- the work coach/claimant interaction needed to be something that, as well as being beneficial for the employee, was perceived as being beneficial (rather than something mandated with threat of sanctions);
- high paid employees sometimes had “job coaches” so it could be argued that those on lower incomes would benefit from this too;
- similarly support for apprenticeships is focused on under 25s, with a lack of support for older ages.

To be successful, work coaches would not just address the issues of hours worked and hourly pay, but could also address the more holistic state of mind of the employee; issues with debt; issues with life skills or the need for retraining at mid-career or older. This could improve productivity by reducing the types of stress which hamper performance. Employers also welcomed the removal of the simple 16 hour threshold which they felt inhibited some of their part time staff from accepting opportunities to work different hours. Some also said that they had no objection to work coaches drawing attention to better paid vacancies to their employees as leaving for a better paid job was always an understandable choice. Of course it remains to be seen what employers’ actual reactions will be when work coaches encourage their employees to leave for better paid jobs.

The Work and Pensions Committee argued that the in-work service offers “progress in breaking the cycle of people getting stuck in low pay, low prospects employment” but that “for the reform to work, it must help confront the structural or personal barriers in-work claimants face to taking on more work, such as a lack of access to childcare and limited opportunities to take on extra hours or

new jobs”. It would also require a “partnership between Jobcentre Plus and employers to a degree not seen before”.

We welcome DWP’s ambition to develop a partnership where it will use input from employers and representative bodies to frame its support for in-work progression, and where employers will play a role in helping their staff to increase their earnings wherever this is possible. But we also recognise that DWP’s primary experience has been with individuals who are out of paid work for reasons of unemployment or incapacity to support and encourage them moving back into work as soon as they were able. Deploying this experience with people already in paid work is a major step for DWP. It is an even bigger step for DWP to make a major contribution to the way the labour market operates for people who are currently poorly paid, with poor skills or facing major barriers to increased wages or hours.

Risks and Weaknesses

There are a variety of risks and weaknesses in any in-work service. Some derive from the concept of requiring an in-work progression policy in the first place. Others come from the relative immaturity of the Universal Credit rollout, whilst some are operational.

In terms of sanctions and conditionality, in-work progression relies on claimants in low-paid work maintaining contact with their work coach and on keeping to the terms of the claimant commitment. Failure without good cause to do so risks the loss of benefit. It is clear that this requires sensitive handling. Anyone holding down a job is likely to encounter more difficulties in attending interviews with a work coach, or even in arranging a telephone conversation than an unemployed person. We heard about only a few examples of in-work sanctions being applied so far, and only from a work coach perspective. In general their view was that sanctions for people in work could be justified, although one work coach observed that one of his clients who missed an interview was sanctioned in circumstances where he arguably ‘should have been cut some slack’.

The Department’s RCT will provide some evidence as to what frequency of contact may be most appropriate. But, as we have mentioned earlier in this report, the RCT sample will be heavily weighted towards single, childless people and the same assumptions may not necessarily apply for couples or families.

It is not clear whether or how the Department is assessing employers’ perspectives on different frequencies. One large employer in the retail sector told us that they would be concerned if the Department was adopting a high

frequency/high intensity regime. They also felt it would be unhelpful if, as a general rule, their employees were pressurised into asking for more hours as their job design was driven by the nature of the business and they could not simply add more hours to peoples' contracts.

While the RCT will provide evidence on contact frequency, we have not yet seen evidence that the Department was systematically collecting evidence on what works in the interaction between work coaches and claimants – what was helpful or less helpful. In individual Jobcentres coaches compare experiences and learn from each other but were not aware of any process for sharing that learning across DWP let alone evaluating it.

In-work progression relies on five elements: the requirement to maintain regular and frequent contact with the work coach; the nature of the interaction with the work coach; the nature of the local labour market; whatever support the work coach is able to offer the claimant; and the claimant's active compliance in fulfilling the agreed actions set out in the claimant commitment. But the range of tools available to the work coach is limited and designed principally for the needs, and greater time availability, of unemployed people. A range of training courses suitable for people in work may emerge, but we saw little sign of that happening yet. Accreditation was the most common offer mentioned to us.

DWP's present focus, and that of work coaches, appears to be on people moving from unemployment into work. Little attention as yet seems to have been given to other forms of flow, for example people reducing their earnings because of ill health or taking on caring responsibilities. These will become much more apparent as the tax credits caseload transfers to DWP.

Similarly, the tax credit regime has a much lighter touch than Universal Credit. While some will welcome the help DWP will offer, others will not. Moreover, as the caseload transfers, the process will inevitably uncover complex cases who will require time and judgment to absorb. This will particularly affect self-employed people with low or fluctuating earnings which are inconsistent with the monthly assessment periods upon which the regulations are based. Unless carefully planned and resourced the migration of the tax credit caseload potentially represents a major risk to Universal Credit roll-out and, in particular, to aspirations to improve in-work progression.

The Department is rightly concerned to ensure that Universal Credit should be simple to understand and administer, with incentives to work that are transparent and understandable. In due course it plans to identify the most effective financial levers to drive claimant behaviour without substantial adviser intervention. However some causes of concern are already apparent:

- We were told that some requirements made of people in work were especially onerous, for example:
 - having to provide paper-based evidence of childcare costs in monthly face-to-face meetings as ‘the system’ could not accept copies of such evidence by e-mail or uploaded to the on-line journal;
 - there was evidence of childcare costs going missing, leading to a claim being closed in error; and
 - long waiting times to report self-employment earnings by phone.
- While the limitations of the on-line journal were a cause of concern for some, Universal Credit’s reliance on digital means of communication was also challenging for those who did not have easy access to broadband, particularly – **but not only** – those in rural areas.
- The rules for couples are complex. Universal Credit continues the principle applied to income-related benefits (such as JSA and ESA) of predicating awards on the principle of considering partner income as well those of the claimant. This raises questions around the extent to which in-work support should be aimed at households rather than individuals.
- Conditionality ‘catch up’ is an issue. The conditionality regime which applies to the claimant is decided by the service centre on the basis of information about earnings received from HMRC; but if people’s earnings vary or they are not paid monthly this information will often be out of phase with their current work and earnings status. This is frustrating both for claimants themselves and for work coaches. Nor can it be right to move people frequently between full conditionality, light touch and no conditionality regimes when their pattern of work is predictably irregular.
- There was a desire among the work coaches that we spoke to that communication channels between Service Centres and Jobcentres should be strengthened. These communication problems have led to delays in processing and other issues impairing service delivery. Of particular concern was the fact that some working claimants were being notified of sanctions, which had been imposed for something they had done – or failed to do – when they were unemployed. The delays were attributed to Service Centre ‘backlogs’. Receiving such a notification well after the event can have a detrimental impact on their motivation and potentially damage their relationship with their work coach.

- Work coaches often struggle to explain confidently the full ramifications of increased earnings on benefit entitlement and conditionality to claimants. They do have access to a better-off calculator but they felt it was inadequate in capturing all the complexities claimants need to think about to make informed decisions about taking on more work.

Although the trial mandates the level of conditionality applied to individuals, work coaches appreciate the discretion available to them in normal circumstances. They believe it enhances their effectiveness and enables them to provide a good service for claimants. They did however express concern that the Department might at some stage impose a more prescribed conditionality frequency, and revert to setting hard numerical targets. One coach described this possibility as a regime ‘where we hit the target but miss the point’. We did not see much sign of attempts by the Department to evaluate the effectiveness of work coaches’ use of discretion and where the boundaries of discretion should lie, or of how best to conduct performance management in the absence of quantitative targets. We would encourage DWP to remedy this by evaluating the use of work coach discretion and its impact on outcomes for claimants, assessing the effectiveness of current guidance and setting out in a transparent way its approach to performance management for work coaches.

There were some suggestions that employers were taking advantage by expecting Jobcentres to pay for tools, clothing, certificates, and basic training required by their employees which they would have otherwise provided themselves.

Work coaches have described to us how discretion is important when dealing with in-work claimants, and we support that view. However there are a small number of issues where we consider that the Department should ensure greater clarity of policy intent in order to ensure a measure of consistency in that discretion. For example:

- There are a wide range of reasons why individuals choose to work part-time, and each may suggest a different level of engagement and support from the Department. For example, some will have a preference to work short hours because of ill-health or caring responsibilities, others will lack motivation and/or a desire to progress. Others will be anxious about how their housing costs will be met as their hours or earnings change. But other groups of part-time workers merit closer examination by the Department – e.g. those seeking to develop knowledge and skills – either to re-train or work towards a qualification in readiness for a change of

career, progression in their current profession, or simply for personal interest.

- Training and development are key tools in supporting progression. To what degree should the Department be responsible for funding training for in-work claimants, and how does it safeguard against taking on the cost of what might reasonably be regarded as appropriate 'on the job' training?

In the next chapter we set out our views on how the Department should develop and strengthen its policy in this area.

5. How should DWP develop in-work progression?

Testing a broader range of interventions

There is little evidence on the nature and frequency of interventions which will best encourage job progression. We therefore endorse the Department's 'test and learn' strategy and believe it should test a wide variety of approaches with different claimant types, accompanied by robust evaluation.

The tests should range from large scale, centrally planned randomised controlled trials, to small scale locally generated experiments designed to share more widely and systematically Work Coach learning and best practice.

The questions the Department might explore range in ambition from modest approaches to more comprehensive changes. We consider some of these below.

How different should the in-work offer be from the current out-of-work offer?

This is a key design question to which there is no clear answer. Claimants in the low-pay no-pay cycle have fluctuating earnings and will therefore almost certainly experience frequent moves between Universal Credit conditionality groups.³³ Changing the different types of support on offer with each move is unlikely to be helpful to the claimant. Since our research with work coaches suggests that barriers to extra (or higher paid) work are often broadly similar to barriers a workless person faces when trying to find work, much of the support that work coaches already offer may be beneficial to claimants whether in or out of work or regardless of their conditionality group.

However there are issues with this approach:

- In-work claimants are already meeting some of the Department's expectations – e.g. to be in employment and so may expect different treatment by Jobcentres.³⁴ People who have previously only claimed tax credits may not have had any contact with Jobcentres at all. There is some evidence to support the use of sanctions for those out of work as

³³ The low-pay-no-pay cycle describes a situation where individuals repeatedly transition between worklessness and low paid insecure work.

³⁴ Child Poverty Unit (2014): *Making decisions about work in low income couple households*
Child Poverty Unit

having an impact.³⁵ However, stakeholders have told us that there are reasons to believe sanctions may prompt moves into work but not towards sustained work or progression. In addition, those in paid work are less likely to be available for regular and frequent face-to-face engagement with a work coach.

- The progression agenda requires a culture shift. The out-of-work service currently encourages claimants into any job as soon as they are ready, and that includes minimum wage jobs and/or low hours work and/or temporary work. However it has been suggested to us by stakeholders that this may be counterproductive for some claimants and their prospects for progression in the long run. Some work coaches with experience delivering in-work support have already recognised that for some claimants the best approach might be to encourage them towards a job with better progression opportunities. For others though it could be that moving into any job would be a successful outcome.

In summary, it seems likely that very similar in-work and out-of-work offers would probably work well for some claimants, particularly those in a low-pay-no-pay-cycle who are used to Jobcentre contact and having many of the characteristics of the longer term unemployed. However, it may not work for all. There may be a case for reviewing the model and focusing on better initial job matches and progression for many unemployed people as well as employed people. Large scale trials would be needed to answer this question.

How effective is it to connect claimants with other claimants via social media?

At the other end of the scale, we were told that some work coaches are (with claimants' consent) already introducing claimants with similar interests to each other using social media in order to provide mutual support and build knowledge and confidence. A trial could be conducted to evaluate its effectiveness before best practice was spread nationwide.

What works with different employers

The research suggests that different employment sectors behave differently and that what will work in one sector may not be so successful in another. It will therefore be important that DWP ensures its analysis differentiates between employment sectors, but it would also be advisable if part of their test and learn

³⁵ Social Security Advisory Committee (2012) [Universal Credit and Conditionality](#); Griggs, J and Evans, M (2010) [A review of benefit sanctions](#); Social Security Advisory Committee (2009) [Rights and responsibilities in the social security system](#)

approach specifically sets out to learn what works best for different types of employer.

Developing the ‘what works’ evidence base...

DWP should establish an evaluation framework for enabling Jobcentres to test their own initiatives. Staff on the frontline, who are already positively engaged in the challenge of supporting low paid workers are well placed to have plausible proposals on interventions worth testing. DWP should establish a process by which operational staff are able to propose initiatives to test. **The Department should then use its analytical capacity to support Jobcentres to identify a cohort of claimants to be involved with the test, and match them to a control group with similar characteristics in a similar area.** Annex B sets out one potential framework for an “evidence pipeline” which is based on our primary research.

Understanding and reacting to the needs of claimants and employers

An understanding of the needs and circumstances of both claimants and employers is important.

People currently in work on low incomes

The most urgent priority is to prepare for the conversion of the tax credit caseload to Universal Credit. As the previous section explains this migration represents a significant risk to the full roll out of Universal Credit. It will only be as tax credit claimants are migrated that the Department will start to engage with the full range of people for whom the in-work service is designed.

We therefore recommend that DWP quickly develop an in-depth understanding of current in-work tax credit claimants and their prospects for advancement in hours and/or pay, to feed into the plan for their migration to Universal Credit.

Segmentation and digital tools for collecting claimant information

There is widespread agreement that there are advantages in a work coach building a relationship with individual claimants. This would help them build up knowledge about past employment history, education and qualifications and benefit claims history, but also extend into the more subjective areas of interests and attitudes. Work coaches will need to be aware of current personal and household circumstances and likely barriers to future in-work progression. We are pleased to have observed that this is the way in which Jobcentres tend

to operate. While much of this expertise translates into capacity for in-work support, there are opportunities to adapt this model to optimise the delivery of in-work support in the future. These suggestions centre on the idea that DWP should systematically collect detailed data on claimant motivation, attitudes and aspirations, which should be used as part of an evaluation framework to test work coach initiatives.

To be effective this process requires digital tools. Universal Credit's digital platform offers the potential to provide a relatively cheap yet highly tailored and testable service.³⁶ There are various ways a data driven service could be integrated into Universal Credit, either through supporting work coaches with new digital tools, or even using remote signing without the involvement of work coaches. In the case of remote signing, support could initially be delivered online through existing technology e.g. videos, webinars, self-assessment tools but as data accumulates and technologies develop, it is likely that IT will play a more active role in the administration of claims. Underpinning this approach could be a new model of data collection for the purposes of meeting conditionality requirements. Rather than having to sign-on with a work coach, claimants could be directed to provide data at set times. This could be through social media logins, or the completion of psychometric questionnaires and online focus groups. Although the Department already collects a lot of data, other countries (e.g. Netherlands, Ireland and Australia) build a richer picture of each claimant and target support where it is likely to have greatest impact in terms of moving into, or progressing within existing, paid work.³⁷

Another potential benefit of a systematic approach to the gathering of individualised information is that it could form the basis of an effective matching service which could provide employers with an effective way of finding appropriate applicants for specific posts through the provision of individual data on their employment skills, career history, education, and relevant qualifications. There may also be scope for the inclusion of information about work attitude, aptitude and personality although this would require a great deal of care and sensitivity. An effective job match also requires an understanding of a claimant's capability and availability, combined with up-to-date information about the local labour market.³⁸

³⁶ Policy Exchange (2011) [Personalised Welfare Rethinking employment support and Jobcentres](#)

³⁷ See The Work Profiler in the Netherlands, The Probability of Exit (PEX) Model in Ireland and the Australian Industry and Skills Committee.

³⁸ Availability is composed of a wide range of metrics which relate to the individuals' personal circumstances, including motivation, confidence and CV updating.

The Department currently has a contract for a “Universal Jobmatch” service, however its effectiveness is unclear. Indeed our own discussions with work coaches suggest there are legitimate concerns about the practicality of this service.³⁹ We would suggest that the Department makes greater use of matching within this provision.

Comprehensive information on individual claimants could form the basis for segmentation. For example it might be effective to segment the light touch group so that interventions were timed to coincide with life events. There are points in a person’s life where they are likely to be more able and motivated to taken on new challenges and progress in work. Obvious examples would include the completion of a qualification or their youngest child starting primary school. An understanding of these events, through analysis of basic claimant data on their circumstances, should inform the timing of interventions as they are tested. It may be that offering more intensive support at times of greater receptivity could provide the impetus for an individual to begin and sustain a drive to progress in work. Of course it is important to acknowledge that such life events will not be experienced by all claimants, and that their support needs, motivations and expectations would also need to be understood.

In our meeting with policy stakeholders, some doubt was expressed as to the Department’s capacity to deliver segmentation, on the basis that work coaches are felt to be already at the limits of their capacity. However if there is an automated assessment of claimants data then it could potentially free up work coach capacity.

We recommend that DWP should consider establishing a segmentation driven service in the future. That would inevitably mean seeking additional data. That would only be possible by developing digital tools. We also believe that such a plan would require gathering of that data in advance of the service being established.

Employers

Pre-existing research suggests that differentiating approaches by employment sector will be more successful than a one size meets all approach. It is also clear that one of the potential risks of the in-work progression regime could be to reduce employer goodwill if employers felt that it was damaging their own relationship with employees. This would matter if it reduced the overall ability

³⁹ Work coaches we spoke to suggested that Universal Jobmatch was ineffective. One problem seems to be that it is relentlessly targeted with spam from the recruitment industry

of work coaches to find suitable work for claimants, particularly those harder to help claimants.

It is therefore important for DWP to consider how to deploy the insights of research into the design of in-work progression, to continue to deepen their understanding of different sectors and the drivers of employers' career development practice, and to assess how employers are reacting to in-work progression and respond if their reaction is counter-productive.

Contribution to the industrial strategy

DWP is only one of many players with an interest in in-work progression. Devolved parliaments, local enterprise partnerships, cities, large employers, sector or professional bodies, local councils and other government departments also have a stake. In some cases they are already trying to support people into work and low paid workers into more, or better paid, work.

The recently published Industrial Strategy Green Paper,⁴⁰ which aims to “build a stronger, fairer, Britain that works for everyone”, outlines ten pillars the Government consider important in developing the nation's future industrial strategy. DWP has much to contribute to the strategy, in particular their potential to contribute to the four pillars most relevant to the design of DWP's in-work support offer: developing basic skills, supporting businesses to start and grow, driving growth across the whole country and institutions bringing together sectors and places.

Work coach experience is also relevant to policy makers outside of the Department, and we are of the firm view that the Department should explore ways in which work coaches could have an opportunity to influence the industrial strategy.

Getting delivery right

The aim of helping people become more self-sufficient is laudable. It will not work however if DWP itself puts barriers in the way of people by failing to remove, where possible, complexity, opacity and unpredictability.

Tackling the glitches

The longstanding message of Universal Credit that “work pays” must not be undermined by complexity, unpredictably and administrative delays. These

⁴⁰ Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2017) [Industrial Strategy Green Paper](#)

include requiring working people to travel to offices to provide evidence on child care costs, delays in applying benefits sanctions, changes in conditionality regimes which lag behind the claimants' current circumstances, and the complexity of the conditionality and earnings rules for couples.

We recommend that DWP urgently identify and tackle the operational complexities that can present obstacles to in-work progression

De-mystification of benefits and work by providing more accurate information

Our research with DWP operations suggests that claimants are concerned that their overall financial position, at least in some periods, would deteriorate if they increased their working hours or pay. Work coaches therefore have an important role to play in understanding the complexity of Universal Credit and giving appropriate information to claimants about the financial consequences from increasing their hours of work or their hourly pay. Their task is not easy. It may not be overly difficult to predict the effect on benefit where a claimant simply increases their hours of work for an employer, but the picture becomes very different if a claimant takes on a second job where the new employer pays wages on a different day of the month or at different intervals from the existing employer. If the claimant has a partner who is also working, the potential for complexity increases again. The problem is that the rigidity of the monthly assessment period on which Universal Credit is based is ill-equipped to treat claimants in these circumstances, or with fluctuating earnings, with any degree of certainty. It may be therefore unrealistic to expect work coaches to master the vagaries of the system and the Department may need to simplify the earnings rules.

Work coaches told us that there is also a need to raise awareness among claimants who continue to think that the 16 hour rule still applies. Changes in benefit rules often take a while to sink into the collective psyche, and there is added importance in trying to speed up the process of disseminating the message that the 16 hour rule is abolished under Universal Credit. For example, work coaches have found that claimants working up to the 16 hour a week threshold were generally only willing to engage once they understood that they could work longer hours, retain entitlement to benefit (unless the level of earnings took them off benefit altogether) and be better off doing so.

Claimants who currently ask work coaches about the impact of extra work on their benefits are directed to the Service Centre. For them, the provision of an accurate and clear earnings calculator which factored in multiple jobs, in-work costs and pay periodicity, and in which they were

confident, would be a genuine help. We recommend that DWP develops one.

Policy guidance to work coaches

There are also areas where greater policy clarification will be needed if work coaches are to exercise their discretion consistently. In particular claimants may have a variety of reasons for working part time – not least in order to train or study, sometimes for a prolonged period. Claimants may ask work coaches to fund training courses. How will work coaches respond to these common scenarios with any degree of consistency?

Moreover, claimants and their representative groups would be helpful in identifying glitches in the system that may hinder a claimant from advancing in work. Existing relationships with such groups could be usefully exploited by the Department to garner more information about those issues.

We recommend that DWP clarify policy in a number of areas – for example on the variety of circumstances where claimants are working part-time in order to study, or re-train, or pursue other interests – so that Work Coaches can exercise their discretion with a measure of consistency.

6. Recommendations

Successfully delivering the aims for Universal Credit will require several objectives to be met.

First, it is important that a balance is struck between having reasonable expectations of claimants to achieve increased hours of work or greater remuneration while taking account of an individual's capabilities and constraints.

Second, there is also a need to understand claimants' local situation with regards to their local labour market and relevant services. The range of opportunities available to claimants is often considerable, though this will vary from case to case – not least geographically. Knowledge is required of local labour market opportunities, employment sectors, career pathways in the claimant's occupation, how claimants' existing skills could be transferred, as well as training and work experience opportunities to develop new skills. To address existing barriers, knowledge of the provision of local services such as child care facilities, and tuition in basic English and numeracy is necessary.

Third, there must be a recognition of the fact that many of the support opportunities for claimants lie outside the Department. Being able to link up with the wide array of service providers (and on-the-job training opportunities) is a necessary yet complex challenge. Each Jobcentre is situated in a very different context and the quality and range of provision will depend on many factors beyond the Department's control. Being able to refer claimants to appropriate provision not only depends on having links to these services, but also resolving the difficult question of how best to use limited resources.

To do this, different approaches must be tested. In summary, our recommendations are that DWP should:

1. test a much broader range of interventions, including those identified by work coaches in local Jobcentres for the full range of working claimants;
2. establish a formal evaluation framework that enables Jobcentres to carry out this testing while drawing on the Department's central analytical capacity and its access to high quality data to ensure rigorous evaluation;
3. develop quickly an in-depth understanding of current in-work tax credit claimants and their prospects for advancement in hours and/or pay, to feed into the plan for the migration of existing tax credit claimants to Universal Credit;

4. adopt a data driven approach to support segmentation, for example segment Universal Claimants for the best form of support using a range of personal and, potentially, psychometric data;
5. urgently identify and tackle some of the operational complexities that can present obstacles to in-work progression;
6. develop a better 'it pays to progress' calculator, in which work coaches and claimants have confidence; and
7. clarify policy in a number of areas – for example on the variety of circumstances where claimants are working part-time in order to study, re-train, or pursue other interests – so that work coaches are able to exercise their discretion with a measure of consistency.

Annex A: Conditionality Groups

DWP (2017) At a glance: labour market regimes

Legal Group (Conditionality)	Labour Market Regime	Descriptor
No work related requirements	Working enough	Claimants whose earnings are over the individual or household Conditionality Earnings Threshold (CET) OR; self-employed and Minimum Income Floor (MIF) applies.
	No work related requirements	Claimants not expected to work at present. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claimants with limited capability for work related activity following the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) • Over State Pension age • Significant caring responsibility for severely disabled person for at least 35 hours • Lead carer with a child under 1 year of age
Work focussed interview only	Work focused interview only	Claimants expected to work in the future but are currently nominated lead carers for children. This includes lead carers where the youngest child is aged 1
Work preparation	Work preparation	Claimants expected to work in the future but not expected to look for work at this stage. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those assessed as having limited capability for work following the WCA • Lead carer where the youngest child is aged 2
All Work Related Requirements	Light touch	Claimants with individual or household earnings above the AET, but without sufficient earnings to take them above the relevant individual or household CET
	Intensive work search	Claimants not working and those working but earning very little amounts are expected to take intensive action to look for work or more work

Annex B: Potential framework for an “evidence pipeline”

Our work coach workshops – and visits to selected Jobcentres – have found that staff are broadly very favourable towards Universal Credit but have reasonable concerns about particular aspects. One such aspect is the random allocation of claimants to trial groups. There is evidence that some understand the importance of maintaining the rigour of the trial, but express frustration at cases where a claimant is allocated to a trial group where they have good reason to think the treatment will be sub-optimal.

These concerns do not come as a surprise – evaluations of DWP’s other trials find similar issues are prevalent among those delivering the intervention. The aspiration of trial rigour is diametrically opposed to the “freedom and flex” culture the Department has successfully promoted among work coaches. There are other cultural issues with running RCTs in DWP – namely, policy makers and ministers tend to conflate “no impact” with failure. On one hand this is understandable and probably relates to the resource investment required to get an RCT off the ground in the first place. On the other hand it is undesirable and unscientific – when a social intervention is being tested the outcome should be totally independent of the will of those involved in its design. While finding that an intervention does not work is undoubtedly disappointing and frustrating, it provides an opportunity to invest in alternatives that do deliver.

A better approach might be to establish a pipeline of experiments to incubate and to develop small and specific interventions for the in-work group. We floated a generalised version of this idea when we met with stakeholders with a policy background who seemed positive. It could look something like this:

Stage	What happens	Method	Example
Lab stage	Work coaches encouraged to share interventions that appear to have worked - they hold the most expertise in the Department	Voluntary submission of ideas from work coaches via workshops or “bright ideas” tool	Some work coaches are connecting claimants with an interest in a given sector with the Social Media accounts of other claimants already working in that sector
Validation	Ideas for interventions considered against departments strategic objectives for the claimant group	Idea discussed by relevant policy leads in strategy. Is it desirable, testable etc.?	Could claimants working PT in a given sector plausibly support other claimants wanting to break into the same sector?

Pre-trial	Small group of claimants selected for intervention	DWP's central analysts to identify suitable participants. Work coaches to deliver (and refine) intervention.	Some claimants connected with other claimants.
Proof of concept (PoC)	More claimants selected for intervention, pair matched to similar claimants not receiving the treatment (a non-randomly selected control group)	PoC delivered by work coaches who did not conceive the idea originally. To avoid "it is our idea" bias.	Claimants selected for contact with other claimants. A second group of claimants with similar characteristics are selected, but not exposed to the treatment. Both groups monitored*
Full RCT	Claimants randomly allocated support	RCT only undertaken if the PoC shows potential. Smaller sample sizes will allow for multiple interventions to be tested simultaneously without contamination.	Random allocation of treatment and control groups.

To develop the evidence base for in-work progression, we need to look at more than just RTI.

WorkAdvance shows that successful interventions take at least a year to show impact on participant earnings. Trends towards greater earnings which are picked up in the RTI data will always be a key long-term objective, but the Department should aim to use other metrics to develop a proxy measure that can be observed more quickly.

Such a measure could be found from a range of standard psychometric questions which aim to assess: attitude, confidence, aspirations, wellbeing/happiness, life satisfaction and even aptitude. By testing on a sufficient scale, any correlation between particular responses and long term earnings progression could be established.

Changes to claimants' motivation, aspirations and wellbeing – measured through online data collection designed by DWP's central analysts – should be included in the evaluation of initiatives, augmenting the RTI data on earnings which are currently central to the Department's evaluation of the trial.

Annex C: WorkAdvance

WorkAdvance, a multisite RCT run by MDRC (once known as the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation) tested a sector-based approach to the earnings progression of carefully screened subset of low paid workers in information technology (IT), environmental remediation (i.e. reducing radiation exposure from contaminated soil, ground water and surface water), transportation, manufacturing and health care. The progression support offered by WorkAdvance centred on formal training and the gaining of industry-recognised certifications. It also required providers of support to claimants to be far more employer-focused than traditional training programmes, with the differing human resource needs of multiple employers taken into account.

By comparing WorkAdvance participants to a control group, the evaluators found that sites helped participants earn an average of 14 per cent (or nearly \$2,000 in annual income) more than they otherwise would have earned two years after they entered the programme. The effects differed by site, ranging from no earnings gain at one site to a 26 per cent increase at another. Expenditures for the operation of WorkAdvance were substantial, ranging from \$5,200 to \$6,700 per participant for the four providers delivering the programme. The impact was clearly much greater in the IT sector than in other sectors.

The intervention operated in the aftermath of the Great Recession and varied across four sites in US cities. Non-profit providers target a specific industry that is projected to have substantial job opportunities. Participants receive job training and work readiness preparation tailored to their needs. The provider then works with the participants and with employer partners to help them retain their jobs and advance in their careers. The approach varied across providers, sectors and sites, but the implementation stages set out below were common to all arms of the trial:

1. Intensive screening of programme applicants for motivation and readiness;
2. Sector-appropriate pre-employment and career readiness services, including orientation to the sector and career advancement coaching;
3. Sector-specific occupational skills training aligned with employer needs and leading to certifications that is in demand in the regional labour market;
4. Sector-specific job development and placement services based on strong relationships with employers;

5. Post-employment retention and advancement services, including ongoing contact, coaching, skills training, and rapid reemployment help if needed.

WorkAdvance had fairly intensive screening of program applicants (around 80 per cent being screened out). Individuals who eventually enrolled in the program, however, still faced substantial barriers to employment.

All the screening took place prior to randomisation and the vast majority of applicants who were screened out did not meet objective academic criteria or failed to attend enrolment-required meetings.

One of the main findings of WorkAdvance (for the carefully selected subset that they choose to target their intervention at) was that the benefits to participants of sector based training and support can take at least a year to emerge. Where the delivery partner was inexperienced in providing in-work training, any impact took even longer to be felt.

Given the intensive screening process, the findings do not tell us what the impact would be on other low paid workers.

Annex D: Findings from our work coach focus groups

Work coaches are generally positive about Universal Credit and in-work support

- Supportive of Universal Credit generally – including in-work support, which is seen as continuing the relationship with claimants beyond the point they would have reached with Jobseeker’s Allowance.
- Universal Credit is viewed as favourable compared to legacy benefits – it is considered to be more flexible and responsive. Work coaches also consider the removal of the 16 hours barrier to be a positive thing.
- Also positive about the shift from an outcome-driven approach to working with customers in a constructive way – for example, having the opportunity to find out more about a claimant’s current position and future ambitions.
- Developing a good relationship with a claimant is considered to be the most effective tool available to work coaches. It allows progress to be made at an appropriate pace taking into account wider and more complex issues.
- Work coaches like the fact that they have an ongoing relationship with individual claimants as this enables them to develop a better understanding of their circumstances and to build relationships. This would be further enhanced if they had more time to look at longer term career development rather than purely short term earnings related goals (although that is often appropriate).
- Some work coaches strongly support in-work progression as a deterrent to people who might otherwise choose to have a low income, supplemented by Universal Credit, in return for working just a few days a week. These work coaches also consider that in-work progression would make life more difficult for people who were working full time but declaring low earnings.

BUT

- It is difficult in practice to engage with people who are constantly moving in and out of work. The system never quite catches up with them; so while they need support, they do not always receive it.
- Work coaches are less confident about working with self-employed people.

How Work Coaches are supporting in-work claimants

- Generally, work coach perceptions around the impact of their own support seems to correlate with the strength of the local labour market. At sites where the labour market is strong, work coaches are more positive about the support they are offering. Sites in a tight labour market generally seem less positive.

- Keeping people in work and focused on a future where they are better off seems to be key. Work coaches said they do this by: getting to know their claimants, understanding their circumstances and providing, or linking them to, appropriate support.
- Issues relating to disability are not uncommon. Work coaches can link to in-house disability employment advisers to help with people who have mental health problems or through the provision of external services (although this facility varies across sites).
- In terms of linking claimants to employers and employer engagement teams, the organisational structure seems to vary from site to site - as does the availability of external providers. NCS and Working Links were commonly mentioned. Relationships with them have been built up over a number of years in the context of out-of-work provision.
- Work coaches gain the confidence of claimants by showing an interest in what they are doing.
- Work coaches help address negative claimant perceptions about work. Zero hours contracts were cited as a specific example by one work coach who felt that, while the media often presents a negative view of such contracts, the reality of such roles was different for some claimants.
- Work coaches can provide support through funding for work tools, clothes as well as training.
- Work coaches also explain the advantages of a benefit that is designed to smooth transitions into and out of work to claimants. However there are issues:
 - some claimants find the concept of being 'better off' hard to grasp and they want to know the specific figures. Working out whether, and by how much, people will be better off by increasing their earnings is not straightforward. Claimants know the taper rate, but struggle with earnings disregards and other elements;
 - confidence levels in the better off work calculator to which work coaches have access are low. It would be helpful if they had a more robust 'better off' tool that they could use to show people how progress in work would be of financial benefit to them.

Work coaches would like autonomy

- Some work coaches want more control over the way they support their claimants and particularly over the frequency and form of intervention. For example, one work coach supports quite a few teaching assistants who often work more hours than they are paid for, and who consequently struggle to fit in other work. However, because they are doing further qualifications in the workplace with a view to progressing and gaining more hours, the work coach takes the view that it would not be appropriate to make them change jobs or search for part time work that is not compatible with their existing role and does not reflect the realities of their teaching assistant positions.
- Others think that some autonomy is important, but that there should be some degree of requirement to make sure the service happened.

Barriers to progression

- Barriers vary across sites according to demographic and economic factors.
- One key barrier to progression was mind-set.
- Some individuals lack confidence that they are able to do more, work more hours, and get a better job. They need support, encouragement and practical support.
- Overall there is a perception that the welfare system continues to create perverse incentives: one example we were given related to a claimant who was aware that they were more likely to be prioritised for social housing if they remained unemployed.
- Childcare is also a barrier for many in work. It can also arise as an issue for out-of-work claimants if there is no provision available, whereas for in-work claimants some childcare is often in place already, but may not be sufficiently flexible.

Claimant mind-set matters

- Universal Credit provides great flexibility and allows the work coach to tailor the approach to the claimant, but not all claimants respond well.
- Claimants need to buy into in-work support and must be inspired to “relate it to their hopes and dreams”.
- Not all are in this mind-set, particularly those who have a long claim history and are used to operating within the legacy system. Some do not want to engage; others need support just to retain their current job.
- Work coaches recognise that Universal Credit is not about sending off 20 job applications per week, but is more about doing work-related activity which has a much broader definition and allows the claimant space to develop themselves.

Offering a coherent and seamless service

- The in-work service could be improved with better communication between the work coaches and the service centre.
- Work coaches sometimes have to refer claimants to the service centre when they ask questions about their expected earnings.
- Relationships with claimants can become strained when a sanction is received following a significant delay. The delay can be difficult to explain away if claimants have been doing the right thing for months after the sanction was awarded. So while the in-work sanctions rate is low, sanctions incurred while in the out-of-work service become an issue for the in-work service due to circumstances outside of its control.

Work coach training

- Views on the training undertaken in preparation for dealing with in-work claimants are mixed. Some felt that there had been very little training for the in-work progression role.
- On the plus side, some said that changes were instigated as a result of work coach feedback which was warmly welcomed by staff, whereas the work coaches in other Jobcentres reached a different consensus.
- Opinions on the training varied geographically and according to the sites schedule in the UC roll-out. Work coaches who had received training most recently seemed least impressed.

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Annex F: Stakeholders consulted

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