

Work and Pensions Committee

Inquiry: Reforming Jobcentres

Evidence submitted by Changing Lives

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Changing Lives welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Work and Pensions committee inquiry into Reforming Jobcentres.
- 1.2. Changing Lives is a national charity, helping thousands of people change their lives for the better each year. We have around 100 projects in England, supporting people in the most challenging circumstances including homelessness, addictions, contact with the criminal justice system, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, long-term unemployment and more.
- 1.3. Changing Lives has employment specific services, as well as offering support with welfare benefits, employment training and support that can be accessed from across all services.
 - 1.3.1. Changing Lives has employment teams covering the North East, Tees Valley and Yorkshire.
 - 1.3.2. The remit of individual area employment teams varies, but includes working with those who are economically inactive and want to get back into employment, working with those who are neurodivergent, have learning difficulties or disabilities, or are experiencing poor mental health and supporting those who are in substance or alcohol treatment programmes.
 - 1.3.3. Services covering all Changing Lives projects includes financial inclusion support to assist with debt management and ensuring all welfare benefits are being accessed and training workshops covering numerous areas including CV writing, confidence building, interview techniques and budgeting.

2. The purpose of Jobcentre Plus

- 2.1. Feedback from staff within Changing Lives employment teams was that the aims and objectives of the Jobcentre Plus are not always clear to people we support, causing confusion about the specific aim of Jobcentre Plus. Often, due

to short appointments with the work coaches, it can feel like a ‘tick box’ exercise that lacks personalisation, as well as its primary goal being to sanction claimants.

2.2. Given these perceptions, Jobcentre Plus often has a negative image which can lead to a reluctance to engage fully, particularly where the claimant is primarily concerned with the risk of sanctions. The support offered by Jobcentre Plus appears to be very variable, with factors such as the specific Jobcentre and the work coach impacting heavily on the perception.

2.3. The reputation of Jobcentre Plus is longstanding and is unlikely to be resolved with a rebrand. We would recommend that, rather than focusing on any perceived “image problem”, the solution comes from changing perception through action. If Jobcentre Plus can implement change that positively impacts claimants, the image of Jobcentre Plus will naturally improve.

3. The experience in Jobcentre Plus

3.1. The physical environment in Jobcentre Plus can be a barrier to engagement with support.

3.1.1. Jobcentre Plus has open plan office spaces where claimants meet with work coaches. These are loud, bright and can be overwhelming environments. For claimants with sensory needs this can be particularly difficult to manage, be detrimental to wellbeing and have a significant impact on engagement. We would recommend having quiet, private, spaces available, where needed, which would reduce this barrier and lead to better engagement. Alongside this, consideration should be given to whether individual claimants need to attend in person, where the environment poses difficulties for them, or whether this can be done through phone or videocall, or meeting in an alternative location.

3.1.2. The first interaction when attending Jobcentre Plus is often with the security guard. The need for security is recognised, but this can be intimidating. The focus on security does not always foster a friendly environment and can be perceived as confrontational. Creating a more welcoming, respectful, atmosphere will positively impact on everyone and make Jobcentre Plus feel more supportive.

- 3.1.3. Claimants who arrive more than five minutes early for an appointment are not permitted entry to the Jobcentre and must wait outside the building.
- 3.1.3.1. Claimants often use public transport to attend appointments, which is not always reliable, necessitating the use of an earlier service to avoid being late and facing possible sanctions.
- 3.1.3.2. Some claimants are vulnerable and standing outside of the Jobcentre can exacerbate this. For example, those in recovery from substances often want to avoid past associates, with whom they previously used substances, but this is often unavoidable while waiting outside of the Jobcentre. Another example was someone who had fled domestic violence being at risk as their former partner knew which Jobcentre they were attending.
- 3.1.3.3. As a solution, we would recommend having a dedicated waiting area for people who arrive early where they can access, for example, current job vacancies or training courses available.
- 3.2. For those who have been out of the workforce long-term the journey back into employment can be particularly daunting.
- 3.2.1. The level of work commitments can feel overwhelming for those who have been economically inactive for a significant period, and they would benefit from a more staggered approach to build up the work commitments required.
- 3.2.2. These claimants benefit greatly from the support offered from schemes such as those run by Changing Lives. These offer bespoke services which are tailored to the needs of the specific individual. Employment is often not the primary goal, but rather moving people one step closer towards being ready to seek work.
- 3.3. Claimants with additional needs, including neurodiversity, learning difficulties or disabilities, mental health needs, substance and alcohol use, and other disabilities or health needs, can face additional barriers in seeking employment and engaging with Jobcentre Plus.
- 3.3.1. The effectiveness of the support provided can be very variable, with the specific work coach being the main factor. There are some fantastic

examples of work coaches understanding the claimant's specific needs, tailoring the support and work commitments to take account of this, and being empathetic towards individual circumstances. However, there can also be a lack of reasonable adjustments and work commitments being unrealistic leaving the sense that people had been set up to fail. An increase in specialised work coaches, who have received additional training, should be implemented to support these claimants effectively. Alongside this, greater use and recognition of support schemes, such as those provided by Changing Lives, should be implemented. However, these services are usually only funded on a short-term basis and are not consistent across the country. Therefore, additional investment needs to be made to ensure these services are available.

3.4. Jobcentre Plus can arrange for claimants to attend a wide variety of courses which can be beneficial in gaining skills for employment. However, the suitability of the course for the specific individual does not always seem to be considered. Claimants attending inappropriate courses is counterintuitive to supporting them into employment. Concerns around being sanctioned can be a barrier for claimants addressing this with their work coach and advocating for support that would be valuable. We would recommend reconsideration of any policies that mandate course attendance for all claimants, instead considering the suitability of any courses on an individual basis.

3.5. Moving to more digital services, such as the use of the journal for communication, has been a positive experience for many claimants. Unfortunately, it has also led to more digital exclusion for those without the required skills or technology. While libraries do provide online access there has been a significant number of libraries closing, or offering reduced opening hours, which has also disproportionately impacted socioeconomically deprived areas. Even where libraries are available, they are not always able to offer the level of support required for those who do not have the skills. This has led to claimant having their claims closed, or receiving sanctions, as they have not been able to access the online system. These claimants would benefit from non-digital alternatives as well as basic courses in digital skills being offered.

4. Working with others

- 4.1. Changing Lives services operate across numerous Jobcentres; however, the referrals we receive are not consistent across each office, with some Jobcentres making no referrals to our services at all. There have also been examples of Jobcentres that have declined to meet to discuss the support we can offer. This would suggest that there is either a lack of awareness that such services exist or that there is not an appreciation of how the support can be beneficial to claimants.
- 4.2. The engagement from work coaches with our staff supporting claimants is again variable dependent on the individual work coach. There are excellent examples of work coaches working collaboratively with other organisations, including Changing Lives, which positively impacts the claimant. However, there were also examples of staff feeling the work coaches did not actively engage with them or were dismissive about the contribution they could make in supporting the claimant.
- 4.3. We would recommend that Jobcentre Plus foster strong working relationships with external partners to improve the support offered to claimants. This could be achieved through local area meetings, working collaboratively in individual cases and training staff on what services are available. However, this can be difficult to maintain when a lot of third sector organisations have short term funding to provide these services. This creates inconsistency in services and is detrimental to the collaborative relationships that have been built. As such there also needs to be long term funding for services that provide this specialist support.