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## MPs' inquiry: Five things we've learned about benefit sanctions

From the effects on claimant health, to why you are more likely to be sanctioned if you sign on in Derby, there was much to learn from this week's sanctions inquiry hearing

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Jobseekers enter a jobcentre plus in London. Photograph: Rex Features/Rex Features

I learned more than five things about benefit sanctions at this week's work and pensions select committee hearing (watch proceedings [here](#)). But these five stood out for me.

### 1. It's official: sanctions are bad for your health.

The following piece of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) guidance for jobcentre staff was brought to the attention of MPs by Alison Garnham, chief executive of Child Poverty Action Group:

It would be usual for a normal healthy adult to suffer some deterioration in their health if they were without

- essential items, such as food, clothing, heating and accommodation or
- sufficient money to buy essential items for a period of two weeks.

The DM [sanctions decision-maker] must determine if a person with a medical condition would suffer a greater decline in health than a normal healthy adult and would suffer hardship

In other words, there is an explicit recognition in DWP guidance that sanction penalties - and we know many sanctioned claimants are left without income for at least four weeks - will lead to a deterioration in

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health.

The guidance is not used to determine whether someone should be sanctioned in the first place (the rules are clear that if a claimants has breached conditionality they will face sanctions) but whether they should subsequently qualify for hardship payments.

Garnham was clear about what she thought it means:

It is assumed that your health will be damaged by a sanction

2. If you are ill to start with, sanctions are really, really bad for your health

The health consequences of financial sanctions on people who are disabled or unwell can be severe, explained Kayleigh Garthwaite of Durham University. She outlined the effects of sanctions-related food poverty on claimants with a range of conditions, from dietary-related disorders to mental illness (watch from around 10.23).

Garthwaite spent 12 months carrying out in-depth ethnographic research in a Trussell trust food bank in Stockton-on-Tees. She found claimants on incapacity benefit left penniless after sanctioning often went without healthy food, or ate medically-unsuitable food. Sanctions, she concluded, exacerbated health problems.

Garthwaite cited Jessica, a 23 year old woman with mental health problems, who was 22 weeks pregnant. Jessica, who had walked two miles to the food bank, reported that since her benefits were stopped she had not eaten "a proper cooked meal" for two weeks and was reliant on "her sister's children's leftovers".

Naomi, a sanctioned food bank client who suffered from a digestive problems, was unable to eat wheat-based foodstuffs. Garthwaite recounted Naomi's story to the committee:

I ate the food from the food bank and I was ill over the weekend. I knew I would be, I knew from eating the white wheat-based food I would be poorly. But I was hungry, so I just suffered the consequences.

3. Sanctioning is a postcode lottery

Sanctions have increased across the board since June 2011 after stricter conditionality was imposed on claimants, the committee heard from Professor David Stuckler of Oxford University. Yet at the same time, the chances of being sanctioned vary widely depending on where you live.

As the table below, compiled by Oxford University researchers, shows, almost one in 10 benefit claimants were sanctioned in Derby, Southampton and Burnley in 2013-14. However if you lived in Richmond, Elmbridge or Runnymede, however, the chances of being sanctioned were one in 50.

The researchers are unsure what explains these variations: local employment market conditions? Local DWP policy? More research is needed, they say.

I've also seen separate Oxford data setting out some monthly sanctioning rates (highest and lowest) in 2013-14. This shows that in Corby in October of that year, a staggering 14% of all claimants were sanctioned. Yet in Elmbridge, in the same month, just 1% claimants had their benefits stopped. In one borough - Fylde - there was a huge swing in sanction rates, from 1.6% of claimants to 11% within the space of 10 months.

Mean of Mean Rate of Adverse Sanction Decisions in Local Authorities in 2013/14 : Means by local authorities
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Mean of Mean Rate of Adverse Sanction Decisions in Local Authorities in 2013/14 : Means by local authorities	
Mean of Mean Rate of Adverse Sanction Decisions in Local Authorities in 2013/14	
Top Ten Local Authorities with the Highest Mean Rates of Adverse Sanctions over 2013/14	
Local Authority	Mean Rate of Adverse Sanctions in 2013/14 (as Percentage of Claimants)
Rushmoor	8.09
Chorley	8.23
Carlisle	8.23
East Staffordshire	8.44
Bolsover	8.68
Erewash	8.7
High Peak	8.94
Burnley	9.27
Southampton	9.41
Derby	9.59

Top Ten Local Authorities with the Lowest Mean Rates of Adverse Sanctions over 2013/14	
Local Authority	Mean Rate of Adverse Sanctions in 2013/14 (as Percentage of Claimants)
Richmond Upon Thames	2.45
Elmbridge	2.53
Runnymede	2.57
Watford	2.61
Hertsmere	2.66
Anglesey	2.75
Rother	2.79
Brighton and Hove	2.79
Three Rivers	2.79
Kensington and Chelsea	2.79
Source: Author calculations from Nomis and DWP Stat-Xplore	

Means by local authorities

Again, it is not clear why these variations occur.

Another observation from the Oxford data is that sanction rates fall across the board in December. The season of goodwill. Does the system have a conscience after all?

4. Many sanctioned people “disappear” - but why?

Stuckler told MPs that 43% of people who are sanctioned go on to leave the dole (this percentage has grown four-fold since 2011). Many of these subsequently “disappear from view”. According to DWP data which monitors the reasons why people sign off, just 20% of people are recorded as saying they have found work, with the remainder leaving for unspecified reasons.

The data does not record what happens to people who appear to be neither in work or in receipt of social security assistance. The Conservative MP Nigel Mills suggested that as we don’t know for sure, could it be that many had found work?

The risk, according to the Oxford researchers, is that the punitive use of sanctions drives vulnerable people away from social support because the barriers for compliance with the rules are too tough. The potential consequences of this disconnection can be mental illness, hunger and homelessness. The research also speculates that:

It is also possible that people choose to abandon a welfare system that they find de-humanising

I came across a written testimony to the committee which illustrates this point. It’s from Trevor Stanski, 53, a former City worker who has chronic back problems. Stanski describes in detail his demoralising experience of the sanction regime. He concludes:

I am back in the equivalent of sanction mode. I’m used to it. In the last week I spent £1.30 on food. This bought me 2 loaves of bread and 10 kilo’s of potatoes. Thankfully my local Sainsbury’s offers food at 75% off when going out of date. I only eat going out of date food. I’ve given up on the Social Security route.

5. Jobcentre staff feel under pressure to sanction claimants inappropriately

I reported this week on written evidence submitted to the inquiry by two

former jobcentre advisers who alleged that they had witnessed or experienced the cynical targeting of claimants for sanctions to meet official targets. The DWP responded that at least one of the allegations had been investigated and was unfounded.

At the committee itself, Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS union, said his members reported that this kind of pressure was widespread. He quoted from an email sent to the union from a staff member. The email, a copy of which I obtained from PCS union, states:

As a [jobcentre] we are very closely monitored around around sanctions rates. Each week [there is]... a print out of the percentage of sanction decisions we are making. This is clearly a bullying tool in order to bring LMDMs [labour market decision-makers, or people who decide on whether to apply a sanction] into line with senior management's requirement for 80% of referrals to be a sanction. In one-to-one meetings these... stats are strongly focused on by line managers... We are being forced into making adverse decisions and conducting perverse behaviours in order to hit our unachievable targets, all in order to achieve an 80% rate of sanctions.

Serwotka, incidentally, also made a useful wider point. A full independent inquiry into sanctions, he said, will not just uncover system flaws but raise more profound questions:

The question we think everybody should ask is: "What is our social security system for?"



## **Written evidence submitted by Dr Kayleigh Garthwaite and Professor Clare Bambra, Durham University (SAN0011)**

This submission is based upon the findings of the Local Health Inequalities in an Age of Austerity: The Stockton-on-Tees Study, conducted by an interdisciplinary team of academics and supported by the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing at Durham University.

### **1.0 Executive summary**

1.1 This evidence submission is based on the findings of Dr Kayleigh Garthwaite and Professor Clare Bambra's extensive research into health inequalities, with a particular focus on emerging findings from a five year project investigating health inequalities in Stockton on Tees (the Stockton on Tees Study)[\[i\]](#).

1.2 Drawing on 12 months of in-depth, ethnographic research in a Trussell Trust foodbank ([www.trusselltrust.org](http://www.trusselltrust.org)) in Stockton on Tees, this submission provides the Committee with evidence of how people with existing health problems or disabilities are being affected by the current Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) sanctions regime.

1.3 Our research has found that the current ESA sanctions regime aggravates the ill health experienced by recipients of these health-related benefits (and is a particular problem for people with mental health conditions). Sanctions led to loss of their only source of income, resulting in sanctioned ESA recipients often going without sufficient food and/or energy required to maintain good health or recover from illness.

1.4 Sanctions are occurring because of inflexibility within the system, lack of suitability of the system for people with health problems, or a lack of understanding of the complex system on the part of recipients (a particular problem for people with mental health conditions or new recipients).

1.5 We recommend that (a) sanctions for ESA claimants should be relaxed or removed – particularly for those with mental health problems, and (b) welfare rights advice needs to be provided to new and existing ESA claimants.

### **2.0 Introduction**

2.1 Kayleigh Garthwaite (PhD) is a Research Associate at Durham University. Her research focuses on poverty, social exclusion, and health inequalities. Currently, Kayleigh is conducting ethnographic research in the borough of Stockton on Tees, England, which examines how health inequalities are embodied in lived experiences.

2.2 Clare Bambra (PhD) is Professor of Public Health Geography, Durham University. She is an elected Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Society of Public Health. Her research focuses on the influence of welfare state policies on health and health inequalities. She contributed to the Marmot Review of Health Inequalities in England (2010) and Europe (2013); the US National Research Council Report on US Health in International Perspective (2013); as well as the Public Health England commissioned report on the health equity in the North of England: Due North (2014).

2.3 Professor Bambra and Dr Garthwaite are part of a wider five year project investigating local health inequalities in an age of austerity in Stockton on Tees, England. This is funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

2.4 Drawing on 12 months of in-depth, ethnographic research in a Trussell Trust foodbank in Stockton on Tees, this submission provides the Committee with evidence of how people with existing health problems or disabilities are being affected by the current ESA sanctions regime.

### **3.0 Factual evidence: Findings and case studies**

3.1 Drawing on 12 months of in-depth ethnographic research, our findings suggest that people who have been sanctioned whilst receiving ESA are using foodbanks as a coping strategy.

3.2 Our research has found that for vulnerable people, such as those with mental health problems, being sanctioned can have an even greater impact on their daily life. Adding a benefits sanction to their already multiple, complex problems can aggravate their health problems even further.

3.3 Food bank users are likely to be living with fairly long term financial problems, arising from low waged work, accumulation of debt, and living in areas of multiple deprivation, leading to difficulties in sourcing affordable healthy food. When sanctioned, these problems are aggravated even further as the loss of their only source of income results in sanctioned ESA recipients often going without sufficient food and/or energy required to maintain health.

3.4 Our research has shown that foodbank provision can provide short term relief in terms of alleviating hunger for people experiencing complex and often long-term factors for accessing a foodbank, such as health problems. However, food bank provision can be unsuitable even in the short term for people with certain health conditions. This relates to the supply-driven nature of foodbanking in terms of what kind of, and how much food, people can and cannot obtain.

3.5 Our findings illustrate what can happen when people remain on low incomes for long periods of time. There is no excess income available to deal with extra or unforeseen expenses (or income loss from sanctions) and budgeting for extras is rarely possible. As a result debts accrue which are difficult to pay back causing a spiral of debt and ever lower disposable income. This in turn leads to going without essentials and leads to further health problems, for example, worsening mental health and digestive problems.

3.6 People on benefits have insufficient money to buy the food they need for health, however carefully they budget and shop. This in turn has long-term health consequences in terms of obesity, diabetes, and other dietary-related diseases as benefit recipients are forced to buy cheaper, high fat, high sugar processed foods. Our research suggests that ESA sanctions are exacerbating this problem further.

3.7 Our research has found that people with health problems who have recently left the labour market can often find themselves sanctioned as they do not understand how the complicated benefits system works; for example, they may miss an appointment or they may not apply for the required number of jobs per week. This is particularly an issue for ESA recipients with a mental health condition.

3.8 The following four case studies illustrate these points in further detail.

#### **3.9 Case Study One: Karen's story**



Karen is a single mother with two daughters, aged 9 and 11. Karen is currently not working due to mental health problems. Karen was receiving Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) whilst waiting for her ESA appeal. Karen had been sanctioned by the Jobcentre as she was unable to reach her requirement to apply for 17 jobs between 24/12/13 and 31/12/13 (the Christmas period). Karen now has no income whatsoever for herself and two children. She is particularly struggling with energy costs. She recently changed her electricity payment meter – the old meter charged 38p per day for gas and electric even when not in use – the new one, thankfully, does not, and won't run out if you only have 1p on the meter, whereas the old one did.

### 3.10 Case Study Two: Jessica's story

Jessica is a 23 year old woman, who was 22 weeks pregnant when she came to the foodbank. She had walked over 2 miles to get here as she cannot afford the bus fare from her flat. Jessica explained that she was receiving ESA for mental health problems following the stillborn birth of her first child 8 months ago. Jessica was sanctioned for not attending a Work Focused Interview appointment – her mental health problems prevented her from leaving the house on that particular day. She received a foodbank referral from the Citizens Advice Bureau after seeking help for her mounting debts following her sanction. Jessica had not eaten a proper cooked meal for two weeks, and was instead relying on her sister's children's leftovers. Jessica explained: *"I haven't had my fridge or cooker switched on for three weeks, I can't afford the electric. I sold the telly last week – there was no point in keeping it 'cos I couldn't afford to use it anyway."* As Jessica is 22 weeks pregnant, she knows she needs to eat healthily for herself and her unborn child, but currently cannot afford to adequately heat her home or feed herself.

### 3.11 Case Study Three: Tony's story

Tony was from one of the more affluent areas of town. He had been an IT manager at a large mobile phone company until his sight problems began to deteriorate. He is now blind in one eye and his sight in the other eye is now failing too, so he was medically retired. He applied for ESA but was turned down, so is awaiting his appeal outcome. Tony and his wife can't afford the rent on their three bedroom house. Tony was recently sanctioned for not applying for three jobs a day – he said he can't find any that are suitable for him and his specific health needs: *"Applying for job after job, when you know you can't do the job, is so demoralising"*. This was the first time Tony had been out of work and on benefits, and difficulty finding his way around the system – despite being well educated – was central to his experiences.

### 3.12 Case Study Four: Jimmy's story

Jimmy, in his forties, has been to the foodbank five times in the past year. He last worked in 2009 in a local plastics factory but had to leave due to sciatica in his back and legs. He was receiving ESA but following a medical he was found fit for work. Jimmy is currently appealing the decision but is not claiming anything at all at the moment. When asked why he wasn't claiming JSA in the meantime, he said: *"I don't want to go on JSA in case they keep me on it"* and says he would rather *"struggle on with nothing"*. His girlfriend, his sister and *"this [the foodbank]"* have been helping with his meals. Last year, Jimmy previously won an appeal after being found fit for work but it took over a year to reach the decision. He is hopeful that his medical records will make the decision maker at the appeal *"see sense"* and reinstate his ESA. Jimmy said: *"I would love to work, I hate being on benefits, but with my health problems I know I can't work every day, it would finish me off"*.

## **4.0 Recommendations**

4.1 A flexible benefits and sanctions system which takes into account the complexity of the lives of people experiencing multiple disadvantage and ill health is required: sanctions for ESA claimants should be relaxed or removed – particularly for those with mental health problems.

Food banks users reported how a lack of flexibility in the benefits system left them with multiple financial and social problems, ranging from debt, fuel poverty, homelessness, and aggravated health problems, as Karen and Jessica's stories highlight.

The application of sanctions to ESA recipients for small – often misunderstood – transgressions, as in the case of Tony's story, merely complicates the system and can result in total loss of income with a resulting need to rely on emergency food aid.

The current ESA sanctions regime is not proportionate for jobseekers with health problems as sanctions have led to cases of a total loss of income resulting in an inability to eat or heat at the levels required for maintaining good health or recovering from ill health. Indeed sanctions have exacerbated ill health. The sanctioning of people with mental health problems is a particular problem – with the stress and anxiety of income loss adding to their underlying condition.

4.2 Welfare rights advice needs to be provided to new and existing ESA claimants.

For foodbank users who had recently left a job due to health problems, like Tony in Case Study Three, a lack of knowledge or understanding of how the system worked could lead to participants being sanctioned because they had not understood the conditions attached to their benefits. A related problem occurs when those whose ESA ends due to them being found 'fit for work' attempt to claim JSA – often they are quickly sanctioned for failing to actively seek work because no allowance has been made for their "newness" to the system or the additional burdens that ill health can make.

Often, people accessing the foodbank were not aware of other help and support they could access. When sanctioned, people should be provided with comprehensive advice on hardship payments, debt advice, and help with fuel costs.

A smaller group of people, like Jimmy in Case Study Four, were simply unwilling to claim JSA because they felt it would negatively impact upon their chances of winning a subsequent challenge to the ending of their ESA. Further advice and guidance on the complex procedures involved in ESA appeals is therefore necessary to avoid instances of under claiming.

Our research has also suggested that those in receipt of ESA for mental health reasons may be particularly vulnerable to being sanctioned because they experience additional difficulties in navigating the current benefits system correctly.

## **5.0 Annex: Research methodology**

5.1 The research reported here is drawn from an ethnographic study of foodbank use and is situated within a wider



five year, mixed method project examining localised health inequalities in an era of austerity in Stockton on Tees, a town in the North East of England. Ethnography is a well-established and widely used method within the social and health sciences.

5.2 Ethnographic research usually involves observing people in their natural, real-world setting, rather than in the artificial environment of a laboratory or focus group. The aim is to gather insight into how people live; what they do; or what they need in their everyday lives. Ethnographic research relies on techniques such as observation, video diaries, photographs, and contextual interviews. Ethnographic research provides extremely rich insights into ‘real life’ behaviour, and can be used to identify new or currently unmet user needs.

5.3 As part of the ethnographic approach to the project, Dr Garthwaite volunteered at the foodbank on a weekly basis and participated fully in all aspects of foodbank operations. Volunteering and participant observation began in November 2013 and is ongoing. In addition, 44 semi-structured interviews were undertaken – 34 interviews with food bank users, six interviews with volunteers, and four interviews with care professionals to discuss their views and experiences of the food bank. Of the 34 foodbank users interviewed (15 women and 19 men) the age range of the sample varied from 18 to 60 years. Participation was voluntary, confidential, and secured by informed consent. Data were fully anonymised before thematic analysis was undertaken. Ethical considerations were respected throughout the research, with the research being approved in advance by Durham University Department of Geography Ethics Committee.

## 6.0 Relevant Publications

Garthwaite, K., Bamba, C., and Collins, P. (under review) *Food for thought: exploring health inequalities through an ethnographic study of a food bank in the UK*. Submitted to Social Science and Medicine.

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[i] For further information about the Leverhulme Trust funded Stockton on Tees Study, please visit [www.dur.ac.uk/health.inequalities/](http://www.dur.ac.uk/health.inequalities/)

7 December 2014

### **Written evidence submitted by Trevor Stanski (SAN0117)**

I would appreciate the select committee to take my evidence relating to the benefit sanctions review into account. I'm 53 years old and suffer from a chronic back problem (had operation on my back in the mid 90's, collagen from a split disc was resting on my spine for months.)

I got made redundant from a well paid job at Morgan Stanley in 2002. I didn't bother claiming unemployment benefit at that time. When I did eventually try to claim I was told after a few weeks that my contribution based claim was finished and as I had some savings no longer qualified.

I ended up travelling/living abroad. I found the warmer weather beneficial for my back. However in 2009 I was forced back to the UK by my local council who had concerns about my empty property.

Upon returning I didn't claim JSA even though I did look for work. Given my back problem I was looking for IT work preferably that I could do in my own time from home. I had no success and by September 2010 was forced by running out of money to pay my council tax to apply for JSA. I was not successful and eventually passed on to a company called Seetec. After an initial meeting I never heard from them again until approx. May of the following year. The Lady I had originally met had left and I was passed on to another employee. On meeting him, I noticed that I had been recorded as having missed a few sessions but had never received a letter requesting my presence. I explained this to the employee but he said don't worry about it and that he couldn't remove or query things in the past on the Seetec system. Unfortunately I missed an appointment in June of 2013 (had food poisoning) and was sanctioned for a month. I struggled down to the job centre and asked what I should do. They got me to fill out an appeal form and a request for hardship payment. Thanks to the latter I received a payment of £80. I was awaiting my JSA payment for signing on after the sanction was complete but it didn't arrive. Instead a week later I received a letter stating that I had been sanctioned for another 3 months concurrent with the initial month. The sanction had started 3 weeks prior to me receiving the letter. I was accused of missing another appointment at Seetec (basically the one after the appointment I had missed due to food poisoning.) even though I had not received a letter requesting my presence. At this point my back was killing me and I had no money so I just left things. To walk down to the job centre (1 hr walk when fit) was beyond me and I didn't have money for the phone. I just gave up and lived on a bowl of rice a day and some (going out of date) food from a local café (that my friends run) gave me when available.. However I tried not to visit them much as I felt awkward about my desperate need and didn't want to tell them of my plight. I did attend the next Seetec appointment as luckily the letter requesting my presence arrived. I explained to my new seetec advisor what had happened but again was told to that the Seetec system couldn't be queried or amended. The foodpoisoning resulted in me living off £80 for 4 months. Although in truth I lived off only £20 as the rest went on catfood for my 2 cats. I did not beg, I did not steal, I didn't bother claiming the hardship payment, I just starved. Luckily I own my own house, if I had to pay rent or a mortgage, I would have ended up homeless.

From November 2012 till June 2013 everything was fine, although I did miss 1 Seetec appointment but got it transferred to the following week. I had insisted on getting the appointments made at the end of the prior appointment and had email contact with my advisor. The missed appointment was due to back spasms which I unfortunately suffer from on a regular basis even with being very careful. But I emailed my Seetec advisor and got it transferred to the following week. Please note I did attend Seetec for a couple more appointments during this time only to be told that the letters I had received had been in error and was just sent home.

So come June 2013, I managed to cause my back spasms to return whilst sleeping in the wrong position. Unfortunately it didn't improve after a few days so I emailed my Seetec advisor explaining the situation and requested that my appointment be switched to the following week. I received a reply saying that the appointment couldn't be changed. Well as I predicted, I was still struggling with spasms if I moved come the Friday so I missed the appointment. I did email my advisor again on the day and was told that I just needed to give this information in replying to and sanction letter I might receive. This time the sanction letter did arrive quite quickly and I was able to talk it over with my Seetec advisor as I had an appointment to attend for job search the following Wednesday. I duly sent off my explanation that day including copies of the email conversation I had had with my advisor. A few weeks later I received a letter saying my appeal had been denied. I was shocked and wanted to talk it over with my advisor but he wasn't there when I attended my job search appointment that Wednesday. I therefore left it till the following Wednesday to talk to him, but he again wasn't there. On the Thursday I attended for my fortnightly sign on and explained it to my jobcentre advisor. I had wanted to talk to him about it two weeks prior but he was off ill with a back problem. After talking it over with him, I phoned the number on the appeal refused letter I had received from the Seetec office. The man in Belfast seemed very sympathetic and said he would book for someone to call me back later that day in the afternoon. To this, I explained that I don't have a phone. He then said I would need to fill in a particular form and send it in. He also suggested that I visit my GP and try to get a letter from him. My jobcentre advisor at Seetec didn't have the form I was told to send in, stating that they only have a subset of forms compared to the actual jobcentre and told me to go there to get it. I therefore had to struggle walking from Lewisham to Catford to get the form. At Catford jobcentre, they searched for the form I needed and then returned stating that they didn't know what it is. Instead they gave me some bogstandard declaration form. They did try to get me to fill in a hardship claim form but I explained that I had done this previously and ended up receiving £80 over a 4 month sanction period. I also explained how careful I had

been to manage my Seetec commitment and if the Government felt I needed to be punished for being ill then I would take the punishment and don't beg so won't ever again claim this hardship payment.

I duly filled in this declaration form and got my Jobcentre advisor at Seetec to send it in the following Wednesday (when I attended my weekly job search at Seetec). I also went to see my GP prior to the Wednesday but he said this stuff was nothing to do with his and just gave me a prescription for Ibuprofen which I buy anyway at my local Sainsbury's. Over the following month and a bit, I chased up this appeal by calling the number from the Seetec office when I attended and asking my jobcentre advisor to see if anything had come up on the system. I was told things ranging from to soon to no reaction to this secondary appeal yet. I did discover from my Seetec advisor (he let slip) that he couldn't change my request for the appointment to be changed because the appointment was at the very end of the month and there system couldn't handle non attendance for a review in any given month. If my appointment had been a week earlier in the month it could have been changed. He also said he could/would have given me a covering letter to send with my secondary appeal even though he never offered at the time.

So anyway during my sanction I was passed back to the jobcentre having completed my 2 years at Seetec. I was given a new advisor and continued to chase up this appeal with them, when attending my weekly meeting/sign-on. My advisor gave me a number to call but you can no longer ring from the jobcentre. This scenario was repeated a few times before I was comprehensively told that the phones were removed as a cost cutting exercise due to them being abused by people making external calls. It's amazing that no phone is made available to contact external job centre numbers. Having gone through 7 months of sanctions in just over a year, I can't afford and haven't had a phone for over a year. Anyway, continuing this saga, I stated that I wanted to make a complaint when next attending the job centre. That generated some action and I was passed on to a manager. He issued an emergency request (?) relating to my appeal asking them to contact me by email or post. He also stated that on talking to another area (Belfast?) it appears my appeal was never noted.

Well to conclude, I was sent by the jobcentre for an appointment with a work program. At this I explained my concerns about sanctions explaining my back issues which cause me pain from sitting for a period/standing for a period plus the back spasms. I was told by the work program advisor to not sign up. When I next attended the job centre to sign on, I was told that by not signing up I was not capable of fulfilling my JSA requirement and was signed off. I was given a phone number to ring for ESA but it's not much use if you don't have a phone or money. I again spoke with the manager as I received no contact relating to my appeal by mail or email. He again sent a emergency request for the sanction though it was embarrassing watching his struggle to use your computer systems and wasn't able to provide an address I could write to. It's now 3 weeks since then. I am back in the equivalent of sanction mode. I'm used to it. In the last week I spent £1.30 on food. This bought me 2 loaves of bread and 10 kilo's of potatoes. Thankfully my local Sainsbury's offers food at 75% off when going out of date. I only eat going out of date food. I've given up on the Social Security route.

*12 December 2014*

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# Jobcentre ‘hit squads’ set up benefit claimants to fail, says former official

Bosses accused of setting targets for sanctions, while unscrupulous staff targeted weak and vulnerable customers

Patrick Butler, social policy editor

The Guardian, Tuesday 20 January 2015 22.40 GMT



Jobcentre staff were threatened with disciplinary action for missing sanctions targets, according to former official John Longden. Photograph: Andrew Matthews/PA

Jobcentre bosses set up “hit squads” to target benefit claimants for sanctions and put pressure on them to sign off the dole, according to evidence presented to an inquiry by MPs.

The written statement, by a former jobcentre official, [John Longden](#), says frontline staff were ordered to “agitate and inconvenience” customers so they fell foul of the rules, enabling staff to stop their benefits payments.

Staff who failed to meet sanctions targets each month were threatened with disciplinary action, he claims.

Longden says he was told by a manager that the message with regard to customers was: “Let’s set them up from day one.”

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approach caused arguments with customers and sometimes police would have to be called to restore order.

Longden, who says he spent 23 years as a jobcentre adviser, states: “Sanctions of customers were encouraged by managers daily, with staff being told to look at every engagement with the customer as an opportunity to take sanction action.

“I was personally told by a manager to ‘agitate’ and ‘inconvenience’ customers in order to get them to leave the register.”

A DWP spokesman said: “Mr Longden’s allegations were thoroughly investigated and no evidence was found to substantiate them. Furthermore, the people named in the allegations strongly refute them.

“The reality is, sanctions are a necessary part of the benefits system but they are used as a last resort in a tiny minority of cases where people don’t play by the rules. Jobcentre Plus advisers work hard every day to help people into work. There are no targets for sanctions.”




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## Mean of Mean Rate of Adverse Sanction Decisions in Local Authorities in 2013/14 : Means by local authorities

### Mean of Mean Rate of Adverse Sanction Decisions in Local Authorities in 2013/14

#### Top Ten Local Authorities with the Highest Mean Rates of Adverse Sanctions over 2013/14

Local Authority	Mean Rate of Adverse Sanctions in 2013/14 (as Percentage of Claimants)
Rushmoor	8.09
Chorley	8.23
Carlisle	8.23
East Staffordshire	8.44
Bolsover	8.68
Erewash	8.7
High Peak	8.94
Burnley	9.27
Southampton	9.41
Derby	9.59

<b>Top Ten Local Authorities with the Lowest Mean Rates of Adverse Sanctions over 2013/14</b>	
<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Mean Rate of Adverse Sanctions in 2013/14 (as Percentage of Claimants)</b>
Richmond Upon Thames	2.45
Elmbridge	2.53
Runnymede	2.57
Watford	2.61
Hertsmere	2.66
Anglesey	2.75
Rother	2.79
Brighton and Hove	2.79
Three Rivers	2.79
Kensington and Chelsea	2.79
Source: Author calculations from Nomis and DWP Stat-Xplore	

Means by local authorities