

As a jobcentre adviser, I got 'brownie points' for cruelty

 [theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/04/jobcentre-adviser-play-benefit-sanctions-angela-neville](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/04/jobcentre-adviser-play-benefit-sanctions-angela-neville)

Mary O'Hara

2/4/2015

Angela Neville, 48, is describing events she witnessed as a special adviser in a jobcentre that prompted her to write a play about her experiences.

"We were given lists of customers to call immediately and get them on to the Work Programme," she recalls. "I said, 'I'm sorry this can't happen, this man is in hospital.' I was told [by my boss]: 'No, you've got to phone him and you've got to put this to him and he may be sanctioned.' I said I'm not doing it."

Neville worked as an adviser in Braintree jobcentre, Essex, for four years and has written a play with two collaborators, her friends Angela Howard and Jackie Howard, both of whom have helped advocate for unemployed people who were threatened with benefit sanctions by jobcentre staff.

The title of the play, [Can This be England?](#) is an allusion to the disbelief that she and the others feel at how people on benefits are being treated, she says. And she unashamedly describes the play, in which she also acts, as a "dramatic consciousness-raising exercise".

[Can This be England?](#) deals with the quagmire that awaits people caught in the welfare system. Scenes are set in jobcentres and in characters' homes addressing some of what Neville calls the "everyday absurdity" of what occurs, such as when people with disabilities and fluctuating health conditions are wrongly declared "fit for work" inflicting additional suffering in the process. It also examines the dilemmas faced by staff in jobcentres, many of whom Neville believes feel stripped of any power to do good and are crumbling under the strain as managers enforce new rules.

"You're not doing the job, you're firefighting," she says. "From my own experience, staff are subjected to constant and aggressive pressure to meet and exceed targets. Colleagues would leave team meetings crying. Things were changing all the time. The pressure was incredible. Advisers were actively encouraged to impose sanctions (along the lines of "sanction of the month") to contribute to the points system that ranks jobcentre offices. It was often for stupid reasons," she adds.

"And it was happening all the time. A customer maybe would be a little bit late or would phone in and the message wasn't passed on. It was very distressing to have customers literally without food, without heat, without resources and these are unwell [and] disabled customers. If it hadn't been for the fact that most of my colleagues were dedicated and compassionate people I wouldn't have lasted more than a few months."

A demonstrable shift took place once the coalition settled in, says Neville. Along with "relentless" targets, huge caseloads, and less time to spend with individual claimants, she lists the increasing complexity of the system including the many and very complicated forms that needed to be filled in and problems with the fitness to work test administered by Atos. "It used to feel like we were doing something for clients, now it was [doing something] to them," she says.

Things were made all the more difficult, she adds, when staff were given far fewer opportunities to assist claimants with things like accessing grants previously available for interview preparation, such as getting a haircut. "These small things can mean a lot. Over time, though, this fund was chipped away until requests were routinely turned down," she says. "Initially I felt that I had the resources to genuinely support customers. Sadly, this changed once the coalition came in – to the extent that the work almost became the persecution of some of the most vulnerable people in society."

A central motivation behind the play was how "morally compromising" the job had become, says Neville. In one scene an adviser tells her mum that it's like "getting brownie points" for cruelty. When Neville herself became redundant in 2013, she was warned about being sanctioned for supposedly being five minutes late to a jobcentre interview.

There was also a strong feeling among the playwrights that the tendencies in wider society and the media to stigmatise and vilify benefits claimants needed to be refuted. The play opens with a scene where nosey neighbours spot someone on sickness benefit in the street and assume they must be skiving instead of working. “This play is about getting people to bloody think about stuff. Use their brains. Sometimes I think, crikey, we are turning into a really mean, spying on our neighbour, type of society,” says Neville.

She is one of many [former jobcentre workers speaking out](#) with revelations about a “culture” of targets and accelerating pressure on staff to shift people off benefits, (repeatedly denied by the Department for Work and Pensions) often by the overuse of arbitrary and harsh sanctions that mean [people’s benefits can be stopped for weeks and sometimes months](#). Like others, Neville says the new regime rolled out by the government as part of its “back-to-work” drives and budget cuts has caused enormous stress for claimants but also for the staff expected to implement them. Some advisers’ stories have been officially documented, such as that of [John Longden](#), a former jobcentre official who gave written evidence to the ongoing parliamentary committee investigation into sanctions of “hit squads” setting claimants up to fail. Today, [work and pensions minister, Esther McVey, will be grilled by the committee on the increased use of benefit sanctions](#).

Neville acknowledges that she has worked in just one jobcentre but argues that as the evidence from other frontline workers comes out it is clear that poor practices are commonplace.

She insists she isn’t normally a political person. “I don’t have a particular axe to grind ... but it does always seem to happen under the Conservatives,” she adds.

Can this be England? has only had a couple of performances in Quaker meeting houses, but more are planned in the coming months. As for what lies ahead, Neville is adapting the stage play for radio and says the script is freely available to other performers who want to put the play on. One reason for doing so is to gain a wider audience but it is primarily because she and her co-writers worry about serious problems down the road with social security reform. “I’m really scared that these next [welfare spending] cuts are going to come along and that people are going to get used to it and say: ‘that’s just the way it is’. It’s the acceptance of it I can’t bear to think about.”

Curriculum vitae

Age 48.

Lives Braintree, Essex.

Family Married.

Education Helena Romanes school, Essex; Signals Media Arts Centre, foundation, broadcast and video production; Braintree college, City & Guilds FE teaching.

Career 2013-present: self-employed writer/creative writing tutor; 2009-13: personal adviser, Braintree Jobcentre, Essex; 2008-09: NHS administrator, Mid-Essex School; 2006-08: PA, CTL Digital, Braintree; 2005: arts co-ordinator, Essex county council; 2003–05: learning adviser and associate lecturer, Braintree college; 2000-02: creative writing tutor, Essex council; 1998-2002: learning resources manager, Tabor Academy, Braintree; 1992-97: deputy manager/senior library assistant, Braintree library; 1985-1992: archaeological site assistant, Braintree district council/Essex county council.

Writing Can This Be England?; The Season Saga; The Clod Hoper, Belly Laughs, The Little Woman, Pulp Fairies; The Grumpy Court Jester (BBC Children’s television – Playdays); Fact of Faith (BBC Radio Drama Young Writer’s Festival); The Victim (Royal Court Young Writer’s Festival & InterPlay Festival, Australia).

Interests Acting, writing, directing, cinema, X-box 360.

Show and Tell Theatre Company: *Can This Be England?*

The Production



Can This Be England? is based on actual experiences. The play will usually be followed by a discussion session in which members of the audience will have a chance to tell their own stories.

The idea behind this production is that the play may be performed very simply, with minimum rehearsal. Scripts are carried throughout and few props are used. It can take place in any room of a suitable size, and there is no need for stage lighting.



The script is freely available to all who wish to use it (for non-commercial purposes). [Click HERE to download a PDF file](#). If you do find it useful we'd be very interested... please e-mail any feedback to one of the Show and Tell Theatre Company.



Can This Be England? was first performed at The Quaker Meeting House, Great Bardfield, Essex on 30th November 2014.

A second public production took place at The Friends Meeting House, Saffron Walden, Essex on 18th January 2015 (pictured).

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Benefits

Work Programme adviser: ‘Almost every day one of my clients mentioned feeling suicidal’

Whistleblower says her job was box ticking, sanctioning sick people who had little chance of employment, and she wasn’t able to treat clients as human beings



Protesters demonstrate against Atos's handling of work capability assessment tests in Manchester. Photograph: Steven Purcell/ Steven Purcell/Demotix/Corbis

Melissa Viney

Wednesday 5 November 2014 07.30 GMT

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A scandalous picture of suffering, trauma and destitution is painted by a former Work Programme adviser who was tasked with getting claimants off the employment and support allowance (ESA) sickness benefit.

Speaking to the press for the first time since she quit the job last year, Anna Shaw (not her real name) says: "Some of my clients were homeless, and very many of them had had their money stopped and were literally starving and extremely stressed. Many had extreme mental health conditions, including paranoid schizophrenia, psychosis, bipolar disorder and autism. One guy [diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic and homeless] came to see me for the first appointment and mentioned that he had not eaten for five days. I offered him my lunch, thinking he would refuse it out of pride, and he fell upon it like a wild animal. I've not seen a human being eat like that before."

Shaw can only speak out anonymously, because when she resigned, after just a few

months in the job, her employer made her sign a confidentiality clause. She believed that the majority of her ESA caseload of about 100 clients were not well enough to have been on the government's welfare-to-work Work Programme, but should instead have been signposted to charities that could support them with their multiple problems. "Almost every day one of my clients mentioned feelings of suicide to me," she says. Shaw says she received no training in working with people with mental health issues or physical disabilities.

Under the government's welfare reforms, Shaw's clients would have completed a [controversial test, called the work capability assessment \(WCA\), currently conducted by contractor Atos](#), and been placed in the work-related activity group (WRAG) of ESA because they were judged capable of working, albeit with appropriate support. Shaw's employer was subcontracted by one of the 18 "prime providers" the government pays to implement its Work Programme to get jobless people into employment. However, Shaw says she was never given a copy of her clients' WCA, which details their health conditions, so it was difficult to provide the support they needed.

Shaw thinks many of her ESA claimants wanted to work, but the "fundamental issues" – their physical and mental disabilities, often coupled with situations such as homelessness or domestic abuse – were not dealt with. "Every person who came in needed specialist help on a whole range of things, and to be supported, not under imminent threat of losing their benefit the whole time."

She believes many of her clients had been wrongly assessed as fit to work. "I had a woman with multiple sclerosis who had been domestically abused and was suffering from very severe depression and anxiety, and she had a degenerative condition and she was deemed fit for work," she says. "I gave people advice under the radar about how to appeal ... but it was absolutely not in our remit to encourage people to appeal."

The most [recent government figures](#) (to June 2014) show that only 2% of longer-term ESA claimants find sustained employment. [Independent research by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion](#) has found that disabled people are about half as likely to find employment as non-disabled people. Last week, a [report suggested that officials were considering cutting ESA, which is paid to around 2 million people, by as much as £30](#) a week as the chancellor, George Osborne, seeks a £12bn cut in the welfare bill.

Shaw says she was expected to enrol claimants on back-to-work courses. "It was very much ticking boxes. My managers were just obsessed with compliance with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). We would be penalised as an organisation if we didn't sanction people who failed to show up... but with ESA they realised there was very little chance of getting these people into work. They were kind of parked."

In the past year, sanctions for ESA claimants who fail to turn up for interviews with their job adviser have [increased more than sevenfold](#). In each case, claimants lost at least one week of their benefit money, even if they said they were too ill to get to an appointment. “One minute we had to sanction and the next minute we were told absolutely not to sanction,” says Shaw. “I think this was in response to [hostile coverage to sanctions in] the press... so the advice was given that we weren’t sanctioning them but we weren’t to let them know we weren’t sanctioning them... so they would come for appointments.”

According to one of Shaw’s former colleagues who is still working for the organisation, sanctioning has intensified. “She said: ‘It’s got a lot worse since you left and now we’re having to sanction all the ESA claimants if they don’t turn up for appointments,’” says Shaw.

Two months ago, the work and pensions secretary, [Iain Duncan Smith](#), [stated that the WP](#) “revolutionises the way we provide support to those who are the hardest to help, supporting a move from dependency to independence and getting people into work so that they have financial security for the future”. But Shaw’s revelations contradict the ministerial architect of welfare reform.

She says: “I felt that my job was really a non-job and as long as I ticked the boxes, they didn’t really care what I did with them... but they missed the point that these were actually human beings that I was coming into contact with, and going home every night wondering if these people were still alive.”

Shaw’s claims are backed up by a [recent report, Fulfilling Potential](#), compiled by a WP client, Catherine Hale (pictured, right), with support from Mind and the Centre for Welfare Reform. Of the 500 people on ESA who responded to an online survey, 82% said their WP provider made no effort to adapt jobs on offer or make it easier for them to work. Only 7% said their adviser had a copy of their WCA.

A spokesman for the DWP says Work Programme providers “have the freedom to design any work-related activity so it is appropriate to the person’s condition”, and the DWP “offers more money to providers for helping the hardest-to-help groups into work, such as people on ESA”.

But there is no breakdown of how much of the £1.37bn WP expenditure from June 2011 to 31 March 2014 was spent on helping ESA claimants. He insists that sanctions are “used only as a last resort” and “about 99% of ESA claimants don’t get a sanction”. He adds that the DWP is looking at how to share information about clients’ medical conditions with WP advisers.

Framed as a worthless, feckless good-for-nothing



Catherine Hale, who suffers from ME, fought against her fit for work classification. Photograph: David Levene/Guardian

In December 2012, Catherine Hale, 44, who has suffered for many years from severe ME was placed in the work-related activity group of ESA and referred to a jobcentre. “I brought a copy of the report from my work capability assessment (WCA)... it explains what my problems are and she [the jobcentre adviser] said ‘Oh, I can’t look at that dear, I’m not even qualified to put on a sticky plaster’. She just didn’t want to know.”

Six months later the referral letters started to arrive inviting Hale to attend an interview at a Work Programme (WP) provider to discuss what employment may be suitable for her.

“Each letter came with a threat attached that if you do not turn up your benefit will be affected”, says Hale. “The first time I was supposed to go I was really poorly and could barely get out of bed. I was aware I had to phone them up. They were all

really rude and didn’t pass on your messages. There was no compassionate human being in the system at all. I had a kind of breakdown from the anxiety. There was something about being framed as a worthless, feckless, good-for-nothing that left me feeling persecuted and empty of self-belief.”

Hale says she got a letter from Seetec, the WP provider, saying that the centre she had to attend for her interviews had moved to Woolwich [south London]. “I looked it up and it involved taking two trains and walking almost a mile. I advised them my WCA said I can’t walk more than 200 metres and requested adjustments. I never got any reply to that letter or any other letter I’ve ever written to Seetec,” she says. “Then I started getting letters mandating me to four-hour workshops three days a week for four weeks in a row. My WCA report says I can’t sit for more than an hour without pain or discomfort so I wrote and pointed this out.”

According to Hale, Seetec reported her to the DWP for failure to attend on five occasions. “Each time they report you the DWP writes to you and gives you seven days to give a good reason for not attending which effectively is three days by the time the

letter gets to you and you post it back. I’d point out that my disability is not in dispute because they’ve got my WCA report. I’d written requesting adjustments and hadn’t had any reply.”

In March, Hale says she was sanctioned but didn’t receive a letter to tell her. Her benefit was cut by £71.70 per week. Hale had telephone interviews with Seetec so she “recomplied” with the programme. The adviser should have alerted the DWP that she had re-engaged. Hale’s solicitor advised her she had a very strong case of discrimination under the Equality Act 2010 and would have a high chance of success in a county court, but this would probably come with a confidentiality clause. She chose instead to talk. In August, Hale was reassessed and put in the support group of ESA where she is not expected to work.

Seetec said: “We are aware of the issues raised and are working with the DWP to gain a clear understanding of Ms Mollona’s [Hale’s married name] experience.”

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was the result of grotesque government policies

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Frances Ryan: The DWP brags about ending the 'something for nothing' culture, but benefit sanctions punish the unemployed, disabled and poor in ways that are utterly inhumane
9 Sep 2014



'No one should die penniless and alone': the victims of Britain's harsh welfare sanctions

Amelia Gentleman: David Clapson was found dead last year after his benefits were stopped on the grounds that he wasn't taking the search for work seriously. He had an empty stomach, and just £3.44 to his name. Now thousands of other vulnerable claimants are being left in similar by

the government's tough
new welfare sanctions

3 Aug 2014

**I
was
ill
with
hunger,
went
to
prison
for
stealing
food
and
became
homeless**

Darren

Head

29

Jul

2014

**EU
migrants
to
Britain
face
further
restrictions**

on
welfare
payments

29
Jul
2014

When
it
comes
to
our
welfare
system,
we’ve
lost
the
plot

Tom
Clark
27
Jul
2014

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Benefits Opinion

Do you want people bullied off benefits? Because that's what's happening

John Harris



The DWP denies it has targets, but the fact is that cruelty in the form of sanctions is visited on thousands of claimants a week



Echoing Iain Duncan Smith, the Tory employment minister Esther McVey (seen here with Sajid Javid and Duncan Smith) explains the use of sanctions in terms of 'ending the something for nothing culture'. Photograph: Rex

@johnharris1969

Friday 23 January 2015 15.49 GMT

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“**A** Ukip parliamentary candidate named [Lynton Yates this week suggested banning benefit claimants from driving](#): “Why do they have the privilege to spend the tax payers [sic] hard earned money on a car, when those in work are struggling to keep their own car on the road?” Ukip’s communications people said that Yates’s suggestions were “not Ukip policies and they will not form part of the Ukip manifesto”, and the media rejoiced in the week’s example of the party’s supposed fruitcakery – though at the time of writing, Mr Yates was still Ukip’s choice for the East Midlands seat of Charnwood.

But the problem isn’t his, or Ukip’s, alone. After all, in the sense that he proposed stripping “benefit claimants” of something most people take for granted, Yates’s plans merely sat on the outer edge of what now passes for mainstream thinking. When the state makes it clear that the poor and unfortunate are [not to have spare bedrooms](#), and embraces the idea of [stopping them buying booze and fags](#) and [shredding their](#)

[entitlements if they have more than two kids](#), is it really such a leap to deny them non-public transport too? For all its inanity, there is a sadism at the heart of the Yates idea that is not a million miles away from the cruelties increasingly built into the benefits system: cruelties most of us would not put up with for a minute, but which are visited on thousands of people every week.

Which brings us to some of this week's most sobering revelations, in material [just published](#) by the House of Commons work and pensions committee relating to the government's use of so-called sanctions: the punishments that take the form of a sudden withdrawal of benefits for at least four weeks. Echoing Iain Duncan Smith, the Tory employment minister Esther McVey explains the practice in terms of "ending the something-for-nothing culture". Whatever their department is trying to do has resulted in an explosion of sanctioning – up from a rate of about 1,000 cases a month 10 years ago to a recent peak of 12,000 – and incontrovertible evidence of nastiness and abuse.

Everyone should read the wealth of written evidence submitted to the committee, which ranges from material put together by charities and NGOs, through accounts of maltreatment offered by people at the sharp end of the benefits system, and on in turn to testimony from a small handful of people who have administered the machine from the inside. What is described is recurrently nightmarish but increasingly common: in any town where you can find the benign-looking green insignia of Jobcentre Plus, there is a good chance that people are routinely being bullied, hounded, and worse.

The Trussell Trust, which provides a huge share of the UK's food banks, says "over 50% of referrals to food banks in 2013-2014 were a result of benefit delays or changes, including sanctions". The Preston Learning Disabilities Forum points out that "those with an 'invisible disability' [that is, those with a learning disability, who are on the autistic spectrum, or have mental ill health) are disproportionately at risk of being sanctioned", and the Epilepsy Society says the effects of seizures "make it more difficult for people with epilepsy to comply with jobcentre requests". An anti-poverty official from Portsmouth city council answers a question about the wider implications of sanctions in blunt terms: "not having enough food to eat and relying on charities or family ... and escalating problems for the household". The fantasy that a good thwack will get people back on the straight and narrow, in other words, is just that: once destitution comes into view, problems tend only to worsen.

Accounts of the experiences of individuals – most of whom will have dutifully paid their share of national insurance, and always abided by the rules – extend into the distance. A woman called Theresa Curtis tells the story of how her 57-year-old brother, suffering from clinical depression after losing a child to cot death and a close friend to suicide, was sanctioned for 16 weeks after he could not cover the cost of the four bus trips needed to get him to a work capability assessment. The Derbyshire unemployed

workers' centre offers the Kafkaesque tale of a man from Bolsover who was instructed by his jobcentre adviser to apply for a job in horticulture that involved "four weeks' classroom-type training" before he would even be considered for an interview. Two weeks in, "the man's benefit was suspended, and then [he was] sanctioned for four weeks because he was not actively seeking work whilst undertaking the training".

Ian Wright, who worked in Leicester's main jobcentre between 2013 and 2014, says this: "I know of a case in which a person who could neither read nor write was given a JSD ["jobseeker's direction"] by a "signer" to put their CV on the Universal Jobmatch website. Unsurprisingly they did not manage this task, and were sanctioned." I am not sure I have ever read an account of official cruelty in Britain as heinous as that, but when an entire system is apparently geared towards tripping people up, such horrors – which now include the infamous sanctions-related death which triggered the committee's inquiry, that of a former soldier and diabetic called David Clapson – probably become inevitable.

Despite evidence to the contrary, the Department for Work and Pensions continues to deny the existence of any system of sanctions targets. But a drive to maximise the stopping of benefits, and thereby the poverty, stress, and the precariousness that now defines millions of lives, is clearly embedded into a system my Guardian colleague Patrick Butler recently described as "[bureaucratic, capricious and crude](#)". For the government, there is one obvious benefit: research presented this week to the work and pensions committee, authored by academics from London and Oxford, found that in the three years to March 2014, [43% of people who were sanctioned](#) stopped trying to claim jobseeker's allowance (JSA), but only 20% of them said they had found work. "It appears that the punitive use of sanctions is driving people away from social support," said one of the researchers. It also seems to be driving down unemployment statistics. Funny, that.

Beyond questions of the sometimes difficult relationship between disability and paid work, three-quarters of JSA claimants sign off within six months, and our insecure job market means people bounce in and out of unemployment. But a public encouraged to think of "the unemployed" and "welfare claimants" as some separate, degenerate Other seems barely to notice what is happening. In other words, there are millions of Lynton Yateses, happily complicit in the cruelties for which their taxes pay and presumably ready to cheer for more.

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John Longden –Personal Adviser

A Statement on events witnessed by me at Salford Jobcentre Plus and Rochdale Jobcentre Plus between 2011 and 2013

Summary

- 1.0 Managers at both district level and in the local office created a culture which encouraged staff to view the customer (benefit claimant) as an obstacle to performance. The Jobcentre operations became wholly performance led. 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. The staff performance management system was used inappropriately in order to increase submissions to the Decision Maker and therefore to increase sanctions on customers. Senior HR managers condoned this behaviour by refusing to issue guidelines on appropriate time limits on performance, which encouraged managers to look at short-term targets above staff development, fairness to customers and appropriate behaviour as set out in the departments own values.

Detail

- 2.0 Managers at Salford Jobcentre, created an environment where every action with a customer could lead to loss of benefits. They made the decision to mandate customers to all job programmes regardless of their suitability. They did this by applying a benefit direction on the customer to make them attend. The purpose was to increase the opportunity to sanction a customer, should they fail any part of the direction. My line manager reporting back from the district managers meeting stated that the message from the District Manager with regard to customers was –“let’s set them up from day 1”. Managers’ actions and words didn’t reflect the values and behaviours set down by department, they set the wrong examples and acted without any accountability.
- 2.1 There was an unhealthy and unprofessional working environment for staff. Managers created and encouraged a confrontational approach towards the customer and the office manager at Salford set up “DMA hit squads” to target customers for sanction action. Customers dealt with by these squads had their job search scrutinised at an almost forensic level in order to get a suspension of benefit. The Office manager would call the customer record of a job applications a “micky Mouse” job search and customers would often break down and cry or argue because they felt that they were being treated unfairly.
- 2.2 The office manager and her management team asked advisers to set unreasonable targets for customers to find work as part of their jobseekers agreements. This included asking customers to apply for a minimum of 6 jobs per week, regardless of their skills or experience. The aim was to find an opportunity to make a referral to the decision maker with the possibility of getting the customer sanctioned. It was distressing to see so many customers treated in such a way. The actions of the managers put the safety of staff at risk with arguments and incidents by customers a daily occurrence. Security was called frequently to restore order as were the police. Staff were asked to double the number of daily interviews they conducted in order to achieve targets and inconvenience the customer. This put stress on staff well-being and health.
- 2.3 Challenging targets for individual performance were used to cover ghost targets for Decision Maker. This led to perverse behaviour, such as making customers attend the jobcentre daily in the hope they would miss an appointment or be late. This would result in benefit being suspended or the claim closed. This was setting customers up to fail in order to reach targets. Changes in the Personal Development rules gave scope for managers to threaten disciplinary action on staff who failed to make sufficient referrals to Decision Maker, rather than address any real issues about training. The Cluster manager at Rochdale Jobcentre issued office wide Performance Improvement Plans (PiP) to all staff in order to improve monthly performance figures on DMA, Programme referrals and MFA (More Frequent Attendance). I was issued with one of these PiPs to get more MFA referrals despite myself being an excellent performer. In my 23 years I had never had any PiPs or questions about my performance. I felt let down and demoralised as this was an insult to my efforts. I was required to hit the same level of referrals to a Decision Maker each week – regardless of circumstances, or i would be marked as a poor performer. As an experienced adviser I would expect my referrals to go down over time, not go up, or stay at the same level.
- 2.4 Staff was told not just to increase referrals to the Decision Maker but also to focus on particular conditionality questions –such as Actively Seeking Employment, and Fail to Attend Adviser appointments as this would cause the maximum discomfort to the customer. I noticed that my own and other adviser appointments that were being booked where the customer was not informed. These interviews had been booked by the office manager [name deleted] and

by her assistant under her instruction, with the intention of closing down the claim and claiming an off-flow performance target or in order to take DMA action against the client. She had indicated clearly in the conversation box that the interview had been booked and the customer notified in person with a letter by hand, even though this could not have been the case. These fake interviews were clearly illegal action and gross misconduct. There were many instances of this happening with other advisers. I informed my line manager, [name deleted] but was accused of lying – even though I presented him with the evidence. No action taken and the bookings continued.

2.5 Staff were threatened by the cluster manager that their jobs would be taken by other people if they didn't do what they were told. Staff were regularly told by managers to "agitate" and "inconvenience" customers. I notified the Whistleblower of these activities on more than one occasion but nothing changed.

2.6 Customers were being deliberately treated inappropriately in order to achieve performance without regard for natural justice and their welfare. Daily signing was introduced across the board initially to anyone claiming over 6 months but gradually to include new claimants. This was done to inconvenience the customer. One customer was made to attend daily for two months and eventually broke down and wept in the office. Staff were being asked to behave in a manner that was against the departments' values of integrity and honesty. An environment was created where staffs' own safety was at risk, and their respect, and professionalism was diminished.

A Timeline of some Events

3.0 **Apr 2011** – summary of my personal development identified in my personal review states "John to apply DMA appropriately to attain 4% target on ASE, Availability, RE & MFA, to achieve minimum standard of 4% referral rate".

3.1 **06/05/11** – Team meeting was informed by [name deleted] (team Leader) that DMA referral target across the team was now to be 2.4% per month.

3.2 **17/06/11** – Team Meeting was informed by [name deleted] that each adviser must do 2 Mandatory Work Activity referrals per month. Staff were asked to mandate customers to training by giving a direction. This was done to increase the prospect of sanctioning customers.

3.3 **13/07/11** – attended culture workshop at Regional Office held by the Transformation Team. Issues raised by staff within the District were

- Staff are expected to play the game and not rock the boat
- Make sure all boxes are ticked rather than analyse the work we do
- Good work is not recognised if it is not performance
- No transparency or consistency in management behaviour

3.4 **22/07/11** – managers at Salford office decide to withdraw flexi-credit for medical appointments for staff, in breach of well-being guidelines. Staff are told by Office manager [name deleted] that they are stealing money for time they are not working. This measure was confirmed by cluster manager [name deleted].

3.5 **22/07/11** – spoke with my line manager [name deleted] about customer interviews that were being booked where the customer was not informed. These interviews had been booked by the office manager [name deleted] for the intention of closing down the claim and claiming an off-flow performance target or to take DMA action against the client. She had indicated clearly in the conversation box that the interview had been booked and the customer notified in person with a letter by hand. This was clearly illegal action and gross misconduct. There were many instances of this happening with other advisers. [name deleted] accused me of lying – so showed him the evidence. No action taken and the bookings continued.

3.6 **23/07/11** – I challenged the withdrawing of medical flexi-credit by raising the matter with the Senior HR Business Partner. She investigated it and found in my favour. Although she notified the district operations manager that the flexi-credit had to be restored, it was never notified to staff by any of the managers and I had to send an office communication to inform staff.

3.7 **26/07/11** – Phoned the whistle-blower hotline to report the inappropriate booking of customer interviews. This action has now been assigned by [name deleted] to a member of staff whose purpose is to look at all adviser interviews across the office and rebook them at short notice for customers to attend on dates which may only be a couple of days after their last attendance – again with the intention of getting a Fail to Attend and closure of claim – to achieve high Off –Flow targets.

- 3.8** **05/08/11** – team meeting [name deleted] reports back from the district managers meeting that DMA is falling behind the 2% target and in regard to our customers that we must “*set them up from day one*”.
- 3.9** **24/08/11** – Office manager [name deleted] tells staff that any customer who attends late on their signing day is not to be signed but booked to come back in on the next day. This is to punish the customer –regardless of the reason for their late attendance- by delaying their payments sometimes by as much as 3 days
- 3.10** **September 2011** – made aware by a member of staff that they have contacted the Whistle-blower hotline to report [name deleted] for asking staff in her team meeting to make customers sign daily so as to inconvenience them.
- 3.11** **28/10/11** – rang RAD Whistle-blower Hotline to report that inappropriate booking of customer interviews was still continuing. Member of staff at RAD informed me that she didn’t feel that anything would be done about it, as the report went to the line manager of the person I was complaining about. They felt that this way things were able to be hushed up.
- 3.12** **16/12/11**- District Operations Manager – [name deleted] attends Salford Jobcentre. I attend a meeting with other staff in which we raised our concerns about being asked to set up customers to fail, the inappropriate booking of interviews and being asked to agitate customers. He got angry with us and said “you are hitting your targets but you don’t seem to care”. I asked how the district was planning on implementing the departments 7 cultural challenges. [name deleted] said – “what are those?” when I explained them he said –“we do things differently in this district”. I asked him if he was aware of the way we were being told to behave to customers and he said –“I don’t see any complaints on my desk”. When I asked another question – he said “don’t get smart son”. It was one of the most dispiriting experiences I have encountered.
- 3.13** **March 2012 – June 2012** Harassed by my line manager [name deleted] and physically threatened, which was overheard by another member of staff.
- 3.14** **27 June 2012** – Office Communications meeting attended by [name deleted] and [name deleted]. [name deleted] congratulates the office for their performance, he says “*I live in Salford and I see the type of people you are dealing with, I see these people hanging around the precinct and shopping around town, lazy, drinking and taking drugs*”. Such a bad example to set as a leader that he judges people by where they live and what they look like. [name deleted] then talks about the new sanction regime and says of the customers –“*don’t forget these people are taking your money, you are civil servants, you are paid to do what you are told, if you don’t like it, someone else will take your job*”.
- 3.15** **05/07/2012** – new line manager [name deleted] tells me to stop phoning and emailing vacancies to customers and asks me to get them into the office. I ask why and she tells me that I need to “agitate” them. I ask her what she means by agitating and she says – we don’t want people to get comfortable claiming benefit, we want to inconvenience them so that they will sign off.
- 3.16** **Sept 2012** – Start at new office Rochdale Jobcentre. Write a letter to [DWP Permanent Secretary] about the culture at Salford and how I was told to agitate customers.
- 3.17** **Oct 2012** – Receive letter from [DWP Director of Work Services] stating that they are satisfied that there has been no inappropriate behaviour at Salford.
- 3.18** **Feb 2013** – All but a handful of staff at Rochdale Jobcentre are put on Pre Performance Improvement Plans as a preliminary to disciplinary action. The PiPs are issued in order to hit monthly performance targets on programme referrals, DMA and MFA. The evidence can be checked on RM system. The instruction was made to managers by [name deleted] the cluster manager.
- 3.19** **March 2013** – team meeting in which staff are told to increase the amount of submissions to the Decision Maker and in particular to do more ASE (Actively Seeking Referrals).

People Mentioned in this document and their role

- 4.0** [names of DWP staff and managers deleted].

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Neil Carberry, Director for People and Skills, CBI
Joanne Segars, Chief Executive, Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association
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