



Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

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Sanctioned Voices

***A report on the impact of the DWP
sanctions regime as implemented in
Dundee Job Centre, compiled by
volunteers for the Scottish
Unemployed Workers' Network***

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Background

Campaigning outside Dundee buroo, we were constantly shocked by the accounts claimants gave us of their experiences – so we thought we should write them down. The statements given here were collected between August and October by a group of dedicated volunteers who met at our stall outside the buroo two or three times a week. These accounts represent the tip of a very cold and dangerous iceberg.

Unemployment benefit has always included provisions for claimants to lose their benefits if they are shown not to be looking for work, but in the post-war welfare state this was usually a last resort. Today, for many people, getting sanctioned is not a case of 'if' but 'when'. People have found their benefits stopped for the smallest deviation from the duties specified in their increasingly onerous Claimant Commitment (which is replacing the older Jobseeker's Agreement) – and often due to errors and omissions by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) or their private subcontractors. Unlike in the workplace, there is no system of prior written warnings. The big rise in sanctions has taken place under the Con-Dem Government, but some of the policy changes had been brought in by the out-going Labour Government.¹

As part of today's benefit regime, claimants can be mandated to go on training courses or to carry out 'work experience' placements, both of which are contracted out under the Work Programme or other schemes. In Dundee these are administered by Triage, which describes itself as a 'private sector welfare-to-work company', and Claverhouse, which is a 'not-for-profit charitable organisation'.² These companies can tell the DWP to impose sanctions if the claimant doesn't do everything requested. While this report concentrates on the impact of the sanctions, we shouldn't forget that many people are also being made to work for nothing more than their benefits, and that this mandatory labour can be for longer periods than given as punishment by the courts. (It also completely undermines minimum wage legislation and paid jobs.) Requirements to look for work, including attending courses of dubious usefulness and doing menial work for no pay, are calculated to absorb all time and energy. Rather than being geared towards finding people jobs and maximising their potential, the current system appears to be designed to make unemployment as onerous as possible.

Benefits are supposedly set so as to cover minimum living costs, though unemployment benefit has always fallen short of this. Through the 1950s, 60s and 70s unemployment benefit rose roughly in line with average consumption, but since the 1980s consumption has continued to rise while the real (inflation adjusted) level of unemployment benefit has stayed roughly the same and been left far behind. In 2009, unemployment benefit (rebranded as Jobseeker's Allowance or JSA) was only 57% of the Government's income poverty line for single adults and 'just 40% of what a recent independent study... found to be a popular view of the cost... of a minimum

¹ For an overview of changes in sanction rates, see David Webster's written evidence to the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2013).

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/WrittenEvidence.svc/EvidencePdf/1401> (accessed 20/11/14) and also his 'Briefing' on the DWP's JSA/ESA Sanctions Statistics Release of 13 August 2014.

² <http://triagecentral.co.uk/about-triage>, <http://www.claverhouse.co.uk>, (accessed 20/11/14).

acceptable standard of living for a single adult'.³ The Council of Europe's European Committee of Social Rights recently concluded that JSA levels are not in conformity with the European Social Charter due to being 'manifestly inadequate'.⁴

When someone is sanctioned they can apply for even more minimal Hardship Payments. These are discretionary and the rates vary, as our case studies show. As benefits barely cover living costs, Hardship Payments are not enough to cover basic needs. Someone on benefits will have had no chance to put anything aside for a rainy day, but no Hardship Payments are made for the first two weeks unless the claimant is classed as 'vulnerable'. Having no other means of support doesn't count. Qualifications for vulnerability have been neatly defined and include phrases such as 'the claimant or partner's health would decline more than that of a normal healthy adult'. The regulations don't consider how someone might live for two weeks on no money, though if they were to do so they might think that the health of even a normal healthy adult could decline quite a lot in that time. In addition, claimants are often not told that they can apply for Hardship Payments or that they can appeal the sanction decision. Indeed, some don't discover that they have been sanctioned until they find that no money has been paid into their account, and some can find payments held back while the DWP decides whether or not to impose an official sanction. Sanctioned claimants may also not be told that they need to contact their local council to ensure that their Housing Benefit is still being paid. This is supposed not to be affected by sanctions, but the DWP simply informs the Housing Benefit office that the claimant is no longer receiving Jobseeker's Allowance, without giving the reason. In extreme cases this can lead to homelessness. The bureaucratic muddles that bedevil the system can in part be attributed to the rapidity with which rules have been changed, which has left even some of those charged with administering it unsure of how it is meant to work.

In many cases, friends and relations step in to help – generally a case of the poor helping the very poor. When that is not possible, people can resort to food banks, who all report an exponential growth in demand. Or some may be forced to shoplift. Food banks supply basic groceries, but they can't help with energy bills or bus tickets, or all the other things one needs to live even a basic existence. The consequences of having next to no money can be profound and long term, particularly to mental and physical health and to family relationships. It can also make it very difficult to look for work effectively.

This punitive regime and the intimidatory atmosphere that accompanies it make claimants refrain from questioning their Claimant Commitment/Jobseeker's Agreement, with the result that they are more likely to agree to conditions that will be hard to keep and are actually more likely to run foul of the system.

People unable to find work – or unable to work – have been subject to a dual attack. As well as enduring a benefit regime that is becoming transformed into a system of punishment, they face an onslaught of propaganda calculated to make them scapegoats for the sins of the bankers and to dispel any potential sympathy for their situation. However, the casualties of the benefit system are now so numerous that it is becoming difficult to hide the realities of what is happening. More and more people have experienced this regime themselves, or have witnessed its impact on friends or relations. We hope that this report will help open more eyes to what is going on, and so build support for the rejection of these punitive practices. The purpose of a Job Centre should be to help people find work, but this seems to have been forgotten.

³ Kenway, Peter (2009) 'Should adult benefit for unemployment now be raised?' Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/benefits-unemployment-poverty.pdf> (accessed 20/11/14), pp 11-12.

⁴ http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/socialcharter/Conclusions/State/UKXX2_en.pdf (accessed 2011/14), p 19.

Findings

The bulk of this report is made up of 91 individual case histories. Each gives a small window into the cruel and Kafkaesque world created by the Westminster Government's Welfare 'Reforms'. These histories speak for themselves, but there are also recurring themes.

In a very significant number of cases the fault that had led to the sanction had been down to the authorities and not the claimant. Most strikingly, many people had been sanctioned for missing meetings for which they never received an appointment letter (cases, 12, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 36, 44, 53, 54, 55 and 71) or for which the letter was sent out too late (cases 15, 19, 49 and 53). Triage appears to be especially culpable here, but the Jobcentre is also implicated. One of the claimants affected told us he had been arrested after having to resort to shop lifting (case 12). There were further instances of Triage wrongly claiming that appointments had been missed (cases 3, 5, 11, 33 and 34), and many examples of benefits stopped due to clear administrative errors - such as lost forms - made by the Jobcentre or DWP (cases 17, 19, 31, 38, 42, 45, 53, 57, 82 and 83). Another fault, committed by both the Jobcentre and Work Programme providers, is failure to pass on a crucial message after a claimant has made contact to explain why they can't make an appointment and has been assured that this will be OK (cases 7, 13, 22 and 74). There are examples of claimants not knowing whether they have been sanctioned or not (cases 6, 17, 44, 46, 65 and 77) or not knowing the reason why they have been sanctioned (22) or for how long (cases 7, 51 and 58), and there are numerous examples of people not being told that they can apply for Hardship Payments (cases 17, 21, 30, 53, 55, 59, 67 and 68) or that they have the right to appeal (cases 16, 19, 21, 25, 27, 28, 51 and 53). (Conversely, people were being told that they had to sign up to Universal Jobmatch, although this is not mandatory without a specific Jobseeker's Direction (cases 51, 78 and 89), and - contrary to data protection law - that they had to allow the DWP full access to their Universal Jobmatch account (case 50).) Reasons for sanctions include the patently absurd - being unable to sign on through being at a job interview or on work experience (cases 13, 22, 24 and 53) - and also a very large number of examples that demonstrate the cruel inflexibility of the system and its failure to accommodate the restrictions and traumas of peoples actual lives (cases 2, 32, 36, 39, 41, 50, 61, 65, 68, 72, 74 and 76). These last include sanctions for missed appointments due to illness or bereavement - even a hospital stay and a father's funeral.

Requirements for job searches and prospective work fail to take account of mental or physical ill health (cases 20, 43, 48, 56 and 83) or child care (case 28). No allowance was given for a dyslexic claimant who had to have help filling in his job-search diary (case 40), or for those without computers or computer skills who were still expected to complete on-line searches and had to rely on finding a computer and assistance in their local library (cases 1, 31, 51, 62 and 81). Another claimant was sanctioned for leaving a job due to bullying (case 46).

This is part of a wider pattern of disrespect for claimants, which we know from other discussions is enough to put some people off claiming the benefits they are due at all. The fear of sanctions and the dismissive and unsympathetic approach of some Jobcentre staff can make people literally ill with worry (at our most recent stall two people told us they were suffering from stress-induced irritable bowel syndrome); and that is additional to the stress and depression suffered by people who have been sanctioned (cases 1 and

64). We have had direct experience of unhelpfulness and intimidation from Jobcentre staff when we have accompanied claimants to their interviews, and have included an official letter of complaint that we sent back in August as an appendix.

Even when sanctions can be attributed to a fault made by the claimant, the outcomes tend to be out of all proportion to the error committed. The actions expected of claimants vary hugely (and apparently arbitrarily) and can be absurdly onerous, such as applying for 32 jobs every fortnight. Even the smallest misdemeanour, such as mislaying the job-search diary or being a few minutes late for an appointment, can be enough to deprive a person of basic subsistence (cases 5, 8, 10, 16, 19, 37, 52, 60, 64, 70, 71 and 80). And this can set off a chain of negative consequences. One man who was sanctioned for being fifteen minutes late ended up homeless, attacked when sleeping rough, and unable to see his child (case 10).

Case Histories

These were written down as described to us by the claimants so give their understanding of what has happened to them. Because we were asking claimants about all their experiences of sanctions, past as well as present, these histories include a disproportionate number of long-term claimants. There are also very many more men than women, though how that relates to the numbers or proportions of men and women sanctioned we can't know. (Not everyone wanted to talk to us, and we make no claims that this is a random sample.) All names have been changed.

(Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is the benefit given to those unable to work due to physical or mental health problems. The decision on whether a claimant is awarded ESA is based on a Work Capability Assessment carried out by a private contractor, currently ATOS Healthcare. These assessments have been the subject of severe criticism.)

1) Kirsty (28) is pregnant and a mother of two children aged eight and nine. When we talked to her on Friday 31st October she should have been at the end of a two week sanction for failing to check her Universal Jobmatch account. She admitted to not being computer literate; she does not have a computer and relies on accessing her account through her local library. Her failure to access her account was due to the fact that there was no one around who could help her. In addition, she was also suffering from severe morning sickness and depression, after coming off of Citalopram, a powerful anti-depressant, due to being pregnant. The sanction, depriving her of all benefits for two weeks, had led to a spiralling problem with stress and depression and feelings of worthlessness as a result of the suffering caused to her children. She was also, with some cause, concerned at the effect that this situation was having on her unborn child. Her JSA benefit had been due to be paid that day, as her sanction had come to an end, but there was no money in her account. When we met her outside the Jobcentre, she was visibly upset and one of our advocates accompanied her inside to find out what the problem was. Following a heated confrontation with the front of house staff, who objected to our advocate's presence, Kirsty was eventually informed that she had received a further two-week sanction. A letter of appeal, relating to her first sanction, was handed in, and she was forced to go through the rigmarole of applying, again, for a Hardship Payment, only to be informed that an interview to begin the application process could not be arranged until the Monday, which meant that she would not receive help for many days. She was simply given a Hardship Payment form and sent on her way. We then went with her to the Welfare Rights office at Dundee City Council, where she was told that she had exceeded her stipulated share of help, but that, due to her situation, they would arranged for further help to be given to her, though this could not be arranged before Monday. Kirsty had no money and no food to see her, her unborn child, and her two young children through the weekend - although she was due to go round to her mother, who is also in straitened circumstances, for an evening meal. A hurried phone call to the Taught by Muhammad food-bank arranged for a food parcel to be delivered to Kirsty's home on the Saturday afternoon to see her through until more substantial help could be arranged. We publicised this case on our SUWN Facebook page and it had 40,000 views and had over 750 shares. On the Monday afternoon we returned with her to the Jobcentre, where she eventually received a Hardship Payment – and the manner of the DWP staff was a stark contrast to the hostile and unhelpful attitude we had encountered on the Friday afternoon. Due to our intervention, Dundee City Council's Connect Team got in contact with Kirsty and her family, and the Social Services Department were pursuing the DWP for an explanation of the treatment she had received, as well as ensuring that it was not repeated in the future. This case, and the wider problem of sanctions in Dundee, was taken up by the Dundee *Courier*.

2) Andy had been sanctioned for seven weeks for failing to fill in a week's job search in his JSA diary. The reason he hadn't done this was because a close relative had suffered a heart attack. Andy had been going back and forth to hospital, and the stress, the strain, and the worry that this caused meant that he'd forgotten to fill in the second week of his diary. He explained this to the Jobcentre advisor, but was still sanctioned.

3) Iain had been sanctioned twice. The first lasted four weeks. Triage had allocated him to a group appointment, and then changed this to a one-on-one. When Iain didn't turn up to the original group meeting, Triage claimed he had missed the appointment, even though they had made a new appointment for him. His second sanction (which was in effect when we spoke with him) was also due to a claim by Triage that he had missed an appointment, which Iain denies. (Iain has appealed and was waiting for a decision.) Iain also told us that a complaint had been made against him by Jobcentre staff, accusing him of using abusive language, and that the complaint had been filed by two managers who were not present when the initial accusation against him was made.

4) Tom had had a four week sanction for failing to hand in an updated CV.

5) Stevie described two sanctions. The first was in May 2014 when the Jobcentre claimed he had missed an appointment with Triage, though Stevie says no notification had been sent out to him. He has sent evidence to the DWP office in Clydebank showing he had never missed an appointment with Triage before, but they have not contacted him or returned his documents. The second sanction was triggered when he forgot to take his book with him when signing on. He told us that he has to use a friend's computer to do his job searches and on this particular occasion he left his book in his friend's house. When he signed on, he explained the situation to his advisor. He returned later in the day, producing evidence of his job search, but was told that Clydebank had already been notified and that he was sanctioned.

6) Neil had missed his signing on appointment five days before we spoke to him, and had just visited the Jobcentre. He doesn't dispute that this is a sanctionable offence, but, despite asking questions, he has not been able to find out whether he has in fact been sanctioned. All he has been told is to check his bank account on the day his payment is supposed to arrive, and then he will know if he has been sanctioned or not.

7) Bob told us he had had an appointment at Claverhouse, but on the morning of the appointment it was raining heavily and he phoned the Jobcentre at 9 a.m. to say he didn't have money to travel to Claverhouse and, as the weather was so bad, was it possible to change the appointment to another day. The Jobcentre staff member informed him this would be recorded on their computer, but when he signed on four days later, he found out that the information had not been recorded and that he had been sanctioned for missing the appointment. He had not been informed how long the sanction was for. He had another appointment at the Jobcentre the next day and had been told to bring a Hardship form and a bank statement (which he regards as an invasion of his privacy).

8) Margaret, who has two children aged three and 15, arrived ten minutes late for her first appointment with Triage because the bus was running behind schedule. She was told by the receptionist not to worry and that another appointment would be made. She was still concerned and asked to see a Triage advisor who also told her not to worry and that no sanction would be issued. She then received correspondence from the DWP stating that she would receive no payment for four weeks from the date of the letter because she had not complied with the requirements of the scheme to which she had been referred.

9) Tam was four weeks into a three-month sanction. The Jobcentre had claimed he was not doing enough to find work. He is required to go online three times a week, check local newspapers and visit employers. Tam maintains that his job search is more than adequate. He looks online through his Universal Jobmatch account, checks newspapers and visits employers as regularly as is feasible.

10) When we met Jamie he told us that he was still sanctioned as a result of turning up 15 minutes late for a Triage appointment some months earlier, and that he had only received two Hardship Payments in the twelve weeks or so the sanction had been in place. He explained that to get Hardship Payments he was supposed to reapply every fortnight, but he had not been made aware of this. As a result of this sanction Jamie had been made homeless. For a period he was able to find accommodation sleeping on friend's floor, but recently he had been sleeping rough, and on one occasion he was assaulted and had to receive hospital treatment. This had also resulted in him being unable to see his child.

11) Adam had been sanctioned three times. He accepts responsibility for the third occasion, but the first two were the result of Triage wrongly claiming that he had missed work programme appointments with them, and both were overturned on appeal. The first was overturned when Triage admitted he had not missed the appointment. The second was overturned because Adam was able to produce documented evidence proving the appointment had not been missed.

12) Dave had been sanctioned about two months before we met him. The Jobcentre claimed he had missed an appointment, but Dave told us he hadn't received an appointment letter. When he went to sign on and found he was sanctioned, he asked the Jobcentre what he could do as he had no money. He was told to phone the DWP office in Clydebank, but when he asked if he could use the phone in the Jobcentre as he had no other means of contacting them, he was told there were no phones in the office that he could use. He was left without money for food, electricity or travel (never mind a phone call). He revisited the Jobcentre a couple of days later to request assistance, and again was told that there are no phones in the Jobcentre for public use. Eventually, a staff member helped him apply for a Hardship Payment, but it took another couple of weeks before Dave was notified that he would receive some money. Meanwhile, in order to feed himself he was forced to shoplift and had been arrested. (When we spoke to him he had not had any follow up from this.)

13) Drew was sanctioned for four weeks about a year ago. The Jobcentre had set up an interview for him that coincided with his signing on time. He went to the Jobcentre an hour before his interview to explain the situation, and was told by a staff member that this would be recorded and not to worry. He returned to the Jobcentre after the interview in order to sign on and found out he had been sanctioned for missing his time, and that his earlier visit to the Jobcentre had not been recorded. Although he appealed, the sanction was upheld.

14) Mike, who is illiterate, was sanctioned for four weeks for applying for a driver's job without having a driving licence. That was ten weeks before we met him, and in that time he had received only £83.00.

15) Ron had previously been sanctioned for four weeks for missing an appointment at Triage. He explained that the appointment letter was dated 26th June 2014 and arrived on the 27th June, but informed him the appointment was on the 25th June. Despite showing this document to the Jobcentre staff when he signed on, he was still sanctioned. The sanction was subsequently overturned by Clydebank.

16) Ross (29), who had recently been moved to JSA from ESA after an ATOS assessment ruled him fit to work, had already been through a four week sanction from the Jobcentre. He had forgotten to bring his job-search book when he went to sign on, and although it was a simple mistake and he brought it fully filled at a later date, he couldn't persuade them to lift the sanction. Ross was told about Hardship Payments and had received a small payment; however, he had to wait two weeks with no money, which left him and his partner, Karen (23), relying on the charity of family and friends to feed their young son. They were not informed about the appeals process.

17) Clare (24) had been moved to JSA from ESA six months previously, but still suffered from depression, anxiety, alcoholism and asthma. She was unaware she had been sanctioned until the benefit did not go into her account and she enquired at the Jobcentre. She was not advised about Hardship Payments or Crisis Loans and so received no money at all for six weeks. She had received professional help with an appeal, but when she contacted the Jobcentre to find out how it was progressing she was told they had not received anything, even though it was hand-delivered.

18) John (25) had recently gone back on JSA and had previously been on the benefit for a year, during which he was sanctioned three times. Reasons included being late and not filling out the job-search diary correctly. Although he was advised of Hardship Payments he observed that it takes four weeks for a payment to come through.

19) Allan (47) had been sanctioned twice by the Jobcentre via Triage. He was sanctioned for four weeks for missing a Triage appointment for which he did not receive a letter. When he did eventually receive the appointment letter, the date had already passed - and the letter was in fact dated the same day as his supposed appointment (so had been sent out on the same day he was supposed to attend). He asked about appealing his sanction but was told by Triage that this would not be possible. Allan was sanctioned a second time for twelve weeks for leaving early during a job-search meeting. He was unaware this was a mandatory part of his Jobseeker's Agreement, and it was not explicitly stated. Allan observed that the staff at Triage were very unhelpful and disorganised. They also sent him to an appointment with an advisor who, it transpired, had already left the organisation. As well as the above sanctions, Allan had recently found his JSA claim had been unexpectedly stopped when he did not receive a payment. A letter from the Jobcentre had been delivered to the wrong address and 'returned to sender', and instead of investigating the situation (phoning Allan etc.), they had stopped his claim. It was reinstated after Allan had spent some time on the phone to them.

20) Jane (30s) had been threatened with sanctions on a several occasions. One time she had a dentist's appointment that coincided with her signing time, and was harassed into changing her appointment as it was 'not an emergency'.

(She doesn't tell people she's on benefits as she is embarrassed, and she believes this has been made worse by the negative portrayal of benefit claimants in the media.)

21) Liz (36) had twice been sanctioned by the Jobcentre for not filling her job-search book correctly. The first time was for four weeks and the second for twelve. On neither occasion was she informed of Hardship Payments or Crisis Loans or that she had the right to appeal, and both times she survived through the charity of family and friends.

22) Gary (39) had twice been sanctioned via Triage. The first sanction was for four weeks for a missed appointment. However, he had previously informed Triage and the Jobcentre that he was

unavailable on that date as he had a meeting to discuss funding for his volunteer position at the Deaf Hub - which could potentially have led to a full time job. Although he was aware of the existence of Hardship Payments, he was told he was not eligible to receive anything. The second sanction was for twelve weeks and seems to have been related to the first, but Gary told us it had not been made clear what the reason for it was. He received a Hardship Payment of £40 after two weeks with no money. Gary appealed this second sanction and was eventually awarded a partial payment after eight weeks relying on the Hardship Payment and friends and family.

23) Scott (45) had received one four-week sanction for failing to fill in the evidence of his job search correctly. He was told about Hardship Payments and received a small payment, but had to survive by visiting food banks as this was not enough to live on. Scott appealed without success.

24) Michael (19) had been sanctioned four times by the Jobcentre, each lasting six weeks. On the first occasion he missed an appointment as he overslept. On the second occasion he was told that he had missed an appointment, but he had not received any notification of the appointment date or time. The third occasion he did miss an appointment, but he had previously informed the Jobcentre that he had work experience on certain days and times and that he would not be able to attend on those days. He was sanctioned for missing a Jobcentre appointment through attending work experience. On the fourth occasion, Michael was unaware of the sanction until he received a letter telling him he had missed a mandatory computer course that he had not been informed about. Michael had twice applied to for Hardship Payments and had received a small payment. He appealed his first three sanctions, but without success.

25) Isobel (52) had been sanctioned twice via Triage, first for four weeks and then for twelve. Both times the reason was supposedly a missed Triage appointment; however, Isobel had not received a letter about the appointment either time. When she tried to investigate who had instigated the sanction she was bounced back and forwards between Triage and the Jobcentre, who both blamed each other. Isobel was told about Hardship Payments and was awarded £40. She was not informed about the appeals process and was unaware that a sanction could be appealed.

26) Alistair had been going to Triage every week. He was told he was being sanctioned for not coming to a meeting and that he had been sent an appointment letter, but he hadn't received anything. We met him two weeks after this when he was applying for a Hardship Payment, which he wouldn't get for another two weeks. He had no food or electricity and was going to get help from his pensioner father. He also observed that the computer training that he is supposed to be getting at Triage is not teaching him much as the helper keeps changing.

27) Lynn (52) had been sanctioned twice. She was sanctioned for four weeks in 2011 for not making enough job applications and for her job-search notes being too short. She was again sanctioned for twelve weeks in 2013 for a missed appointment at Triage, but had received no appointment letter. On neither occasion was she told that she had a right of appeal. Both times she had to be referred to a food bank.

28) Robin (44) had twice been sanctioned via Triage, first for a missed appointment when no appointment letter was received, and second when the appointment was rescheduled. Robin was not informed about the right to appeal, but knew about it and appealed successfully. Robin also observed that the Jobcentre was ignoring the need for any work to be within school hours.

29) Calum (24) had previously been sanctioned for not writing enough information in his job-search booklet. He was advised about the Hardship Allowance but didn't apply as it takes two

weeks before any payments come through. Instead he got a Crisis Grant and referral to a food bank.

30) Paul (39) had been sanctioned twice. The first time his advisor claimed he had not completed his job-search diary properly. The second time was a result of his advisor re-negotiating his Jobseeker's Agreement so the number of jobs he had to apply for was increased from twelve to 24. On neither occasion was he told about Hardship Payments or Crisis Grants.

31) Duncan (47) had worked continuously throughout his adult life. He has limited literacy so has 'worked with his back', most recently as a taxi driver. A few months ago, he had a seizure in his taxi and was signed off as unfit for work by his GP. The GP's sick line was for six months, and when we spoke to him it was still running. Despite this, he was sent to ATOS for a medical and declared fit for work. He didn't get the chance to appeal this as the paperwork went missing, (he thinks it was possibly sent to the wrong address as he had recently moved in with his daughter). His limited literacy would also make putting together an appeal extremely arduous. He was put on JSA and had been sanctioned for not doing enough to look for work. He told us that, besides his literacy problems, he doesn't know how to 'even switch on a computer so how could [he] search on the web.' Duncan is now relying on Hardship Payments. When we met him, he was going in, assisted by his partner, to appeal for his JSA to be reinstated.

32) Brian had previously been sanctioned for 'not doing a proper job search'. He explained that he had been given a form to take to the office of the Overgate Shopping Centre; however, he had been refused entry due to being banned from the Overgate six years earlier. In fact the ban was spent as he had remained out of trouble since, but the person denying him access was not aware of this. Jobcentre staff had not accepted Brian's account, and he had been sanctioned for two weeks and forced to apply for food vouchers.

33) Colin (31, and currently on ESA as a result of a car accident three years ago) had been sanctioned in the past for missing an appointment that never existed. Eventually, he had gone to Triage who confirmed that no appointment had been made, giving him proof in writing. In the meantime, he had only had £30 to last him a fortnight.

34) Mark (62, and with a history of anxiety and stress) was sanctioned for having missed an appointment with Triage, but claims that no-one had told him about the appointment. He lost five weeks' money and nearly lost his Housing Benefit. He then filled out an appeal form and subsequently received a phone call. In the course of this phone interview, Peter accidentally said (mis-speaking out of nervousness) that he 'had made a mistake' in failing to attend the appointment. He then got another phone call asking why he hadn't kept his appointment and had to explain he hadn't had one. They said a 'different person' (from his usual coach) been dealing with this. He attempted to speak to this person, but they appeared to avoid him.

35) Grant had been sanctioned for four weeks for failing to put enough actions in his job-search diary. His appeal had failed and he had had to borrow money from his elderly father. (He also criticised Universal Jobmatch for not being up to date and for containing many 'bogus jobs'.)

36) Rick had recently been sanctioned for not doing enough to look for work. (His partner stated he had no money for transport.) The Jobcentre staff claimed he had been sent a letter for a Triage appointment, but he hadn't received anything. Rick was sanctioned for four weeks. He applied for and received a Hardship Payment of £42 a fortnight. He had appealed six weeks prior to our meeting him, but had had no response. He was continuing to phone about this, but

was getting put in an interminable queue. His partner suffers from bi-polar disorder and felt her condition was being exacerbated by the stress this situation had created.

37) Gemma had been sanctioned for four weeks for being 13 minutes late for an appointment to collect a voucher. She had had to borrow money to meet her needs, and she failed to win her appeal. When we met her she had 'waited ages for an appointment' and finally got one, but when she turned up she had been sent away and told to come back later as the staff were too busy.

38) Kevin had been sanctioned twice, consecutively. He was told to apply for two jobs for kitchen and cleaning staff, which he duly did on the Government Gateway site. He subsequently received a letter saying that he hadn't applied for the jobs. He phoned to say that he had, and had proof on his on-line job-search record. But when he went to check his record, he discovered that the jobs had disappeared and simply showed up as 'no longer available'. He was sanctioned for 13 weeks, and the day we met him he had been informed that he had been sanctioned again, from December to next June, for the same thing. The Jobcentre staff wouldn't believe he was telling the truth, despite his partner having witnessed him apply for both positions. Kevin was on Hardship Payments of £87 a fortnight.

39) Gordon had been sanctioned twice. The first time, in January 2014, was because he didn't go on a CV writing course. He had cancelled because his children were ill. He had explained this to the Jobcentre staff but his excuse had not been accepted and he had been sanctioned for four weeks, during which he received a Hardship Payment of £84 a fortnight. Gordon was sanctioned again in April for not doing enough to find work. His mother had just died and he had had various duties to attend to (clearing out her house etc.). This time he appealed and was successful, although it took two months to get his back payments.

40) Peter (as his sister told us) had been sanctioned 5-6 times – first for two weeks, then four, then for three months and eventually for six months – for failing to fill in his job-search diary properly. Peter is dyslexic and is unable to do this. He needs assistance but none has been offered. His sister and his brother-in-law do their best – sometimes his brother-in-law has written his diary up for him – but their time is limited and they have their own lives to lead. Peter has been relying on a Hardship Payment of £60 a fortnight, sometimes less. He has had several Crisis Loans and is ineligible for more. He does not have much confidence and his treatment at the hands of the Jobcentre has made him worse. His sister thinks the Jobcentre staff have not taken his dyslexia into account and are not helping where they should.

41) Lindsey was recently sanctioned for two weeks because she didn't make it to a morning appointment. At the time she was in the early stages of pregnancy and suffering from morning sickness. She phoned the Jobcentre and offered to come in later when she would be feeling better. This was not deemed acceptable and her benefits were stopped. Lindsey then went to see her GP, and was subsequently transferred to ESA. Sadly, she miscarried and when we saw her she had just gone back on JSA.

42) The month before we met him, Dale had gone to a Triage appointment but been sent away because it was double-booked. Nevertheless, he had been sanctioned for four weeks. He had contacted the person who made the appointment, who was 'checking it out'. Meanwhile he was relying on hardship allowance.

43) Stuart (46) is a paranoid schizophrenic and suffers from depression. He is presently on ESA, and has been told he could get DLA but is nervous about applying. In the past he was sanctioned for two weeks for missing an appointment, and during that period, he received a

Crisis Grant and was referred to a food bank. He had been sent to Triage – and although his GP advised him not to go, he was afraid he would lose his benefits if he didn't. He had passed two medical assessments in two years that appear to have taken little account of his mental health condition; and at one Triage session he was told 'if [he] felt paranoid, just to give a nod and he could go out of the room'.

44) Willie was sanctioned for four weeks on 23rd October for having missed an appointment in July. At the time the Jobcentre claimed to have sent an appointment letter, but he hadn't received anything. He had informed them of this, and thought it had been sorted out. When we met him he was surprised that the sanction was being imposed– he had been duly going along to a Work Placement – and was about to appeal the decision. He was relying on a Hardship Payment of £68 a fortnight.

45) Catherine (33, and on ESA) had been sanctioned for two months in June-July for failing to make it to an appointment for an ATOS medical assessment. She had written a letter of explanation, and sent it by first class post, but Clydebank claimed no letter had been received. She eventually got her benefit payments backdated after an intervention by the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

46) Martin (35) was part way through a ten-week sanction for leaving his job. He had been going along to Triage, who had sent him to a job interview. He got the job, but found himself being harassed and insulted until he could no longer tolerate the verbal abuse and had to walk out. He hadn't been informed about the sanction, and didn't know about it until he looked in his account and found there was no money there. He had phoned the Jobcentre and explained his reason for leaving the job, but had received no sympathy or understanding.

47) Keith (20) had previously been sanctioned for three months for missing an appointment. He had phoned the Jobcentre to tell them he couldn't make it, but it had made no difference. During this period he had received a hardship allowance of £60 a fortnight, which he gave to his father with whom he was living at the time. His father, who is on DLA, said that it cost more than this to keep him. He also gave his son some pocket money so he could 'have a life', and this led to him being out of pocket. When we met Keith and his father, Keith had just been sanctioned for 15 days for missing an appointment with Triage. He had phoned to explain that he had to wait in for furniture to be delivered to his new flat, but this had not been accepted as an excuse. The Jobcentre had directed him to apply for a Hardship Payment, but the process takes two weeks and it was Friday afternoon so he was not able to apply until the Monday. His flat had no electricity or gas and he had no money. His father was helping him as much as he was able – this amounted mostly to moral rather than financial support.

48) When we met Caitlyn she was six months pregnant and had problems with her pelvis that mean that she was likely to be hospitalised soon. She had gone to her interview with her 11-year-old son, and reported that she had been warned she would be sanctioned if she missed any more appointments due to her illness. During the interview her son asked, 'What does sanctions mean, mum?' The Jobcentre advisor then said to the boy, 'It means your mum will get her money stopped'. Caitlyn felt that this was out of order - 'Imagine saying that to an 11-year-old'. The boy looked worried for his mother.

49) Derek (34) had been sanctioned twice by the Jobcentre. Last winter he was sanctioned for two weeks after missing an appointment. His second sanction lasted three months from June to September 2014. He told us that he had received notification of a change in his signing-on day

only on the new day, and so was late in attending his interview. He had received a small Hardship Payment, but his appeal failed.

50) Fiona (56) was currently on the Triage work programme. She was once sanctioned for six weeks by the Jobcentre after missing a Triage appointment due to a medical appointment following an accident at work. She afterwards produced a doctor's note for Triage, but was still sanctioned. (She was informed about the appeals process but did not appeal.) Fiona had also been pulled into the office for not allowing the Jobcentre full access to her Universal Jobmatch account, although this is not mandatory. She was told she 'had to' let them access it otherwise it 'looked like she had something to hide'. She would 'get her money stopped' if she did not comply. And so she had complied.

51) Jimmy (52) had only been receiving JSA for a month. When we met him he had recently been sanctioned by the Jobcentre and didn't know how long the sanction was going to last. He had been told that as part of his job search he must use the DWP's online Universal Jobmatch every day. He does not have a computer at home, is not terribly computer literate and has to book time at the library to use the internet. This is not always possible if it is fully booked; however, he was sanctioned for failing to use the internet every day. Jimmy was told about Hardship Payments and had received a small amount. He was not informed about the appeals process.

52) Jack (22) had been sanctioned for three months after moving from Aberdeen to Dundee and starting a new claim. He had previously been receiving JSA in Aberdeen and was sanctioned because he had just started a new claim in Dundee and hadn't specifically informed the Jobcentre in Aberdeen that he was moving. Jack had received a small Hardship Payment, but this was not enough to live on and he also depended on the support of friends and family.

53) Carol (31) had been on JSA for two years and been sanctioned four times, once by the Jobcentre and three times by Triage. She was sanctioned for one month for missing a Jobcentre appointment (her error). She was sanctioned for three months for missing an interview at Triage that coincided with a job interview that Triage themselves had found for her. She told them and produced evidence, but was still sanctioned. She was sanctioned for a further three months for missing an appointment at Triage for which she had not received a letter. She was sanctioned for yet a further three months by Triage after receiving a letter telling her of an appointment on the same day as the appointment and after the appointment time. Carol was not told about Hardship Payments or Crisis Loans and survived via support from friends and family. Although she knew about the appeals process, she had not been told about it by either the Jobcentre or Triage. She appealed her second sanction but was unsuccessful. Although, when we met her, Carol was no longer sanctioned, she had recently received a letter informing her that there had been a mistake and her third and fourth sanctions were supposed to be longer. She didn't know what was going to be done about this.

54) Fraser (42) was receiving ESA due to a prolapsed disc in his back. He had had a four-week sanction after he missed an appointment for which he had not received a letter. He was told about Hardship Payments and had claimed a small payment. He made a successful appeal and reclaimed the money from the sanction; however, by this time he had got in arrears with his Salvation Army shelter rent and in debt to various friends.

55) Albert (62) had been sanctioned for a week by Triage in 2013. Triage claimed he had missed an appointment, but later admitted to never having sent a letter out. Albert appealed successfully,

but was still without food or income for two weeks and left to rely on his family for support. He was not advised about Hardship Payments or Crisis Grants.

56) When we spoke to Ally (46) he was signing on in order to get his National Insurance covered as he no longer qualified for JSA. He had been sanctioned in 2013 for not looking at enough jobs. He has medical problems and is restricted to what job he can apply for, but the Jobcentre wouldn't allow for this. He was told he was not eligible to apply for Hardship Payments or Crisis Grants as his partner earned £205 a week.

57) Steve (20) was sanctioned for four weeks because of a website glitch

58) Richard (45) was sanctioned at the time we talked with him, and had been sanctioned three times in seven months. He had been given a month's sanction for not doing enough to search for work, but when he went to sign on again two weeks later, was told the sanction was for three months. For the first seven weeks of the sanction he had had no money. (He also complained about the attitude of the Jobcentre staff.)

59) Ryan (27) had been on JSA for a year and been sanctioned four times in that period, most recently for not using Universal Jobmatch. He complained of not being treated well by a member of the Jobcentre staff, who tried to get him thrown out by security. He told us that he nearly got a further sanction due to his Jobcentre advisor not being able to log onto his account, but she eventually succeeded. He did apply for Hardship Payments, but hadn't been told about them by the Jobcentre.

60) Malcolm (52) was recently sanctioned for four weeks for missing an appointment after misreading the letter from the DWP and thinking the appointment was on his signing day. He received some Hardship Payment.

61) Luke (40) was sanctioned in March when a family funeral clashed with his Triage appointment. He tried to contact Triage but without success. He got a letter from the DWP office in Clydebank asking for an explanation of the missed Triage appointment, and saying he would be sanctioned if he didn't have a reasonable excuse. He wrote to them explaining about the funeral – and got sanctioned. He subsequently appealed the sanction and won the appeal.

62) Chris (56) had been sanctioned five times, and each time won on appeal. When we spoke to him he had been sanctioned for a month for not filling out the job-search paperwork to the Jobcentre's satisfaction. He had also been sanctioned for not logging in properly due to not having great computer skills.

63) William (39) had been told to go to Claverhouse four days before we met him for a CV building workshop, but had forgotten as he was helping a friend move house. He had just been into the Jobcentre and been told he might get cut off for missing the appointment.

64) Robert (33) had gone back on JSA a month before we talked, having spent six months on ESA. He had been sanctioned in November 2013 for not meeting the requirements of his Jobseeker's Agreement. He had had to look for 32 jobs every two weeks and miscounted. He was sanctioned again in the same month for losing his job-search diary and using paper instead. As a result he had to go without money for six weeks over Christmas. He was using food banks and also had to have help to pay for his electricity. Robert ended up having to take tablets for depression.

65) Kaylie had been unable to get to the Jobcentre because she was too ill. She was told she would be signed off, and she had had to make a rapid reclaim. She didn't know if she had been sanctioned, and didn't expect to find out until she saw whether or not she had received her payment on the day it was due.

66) Bruce was sent on a course run by Claverhouse two years ago. It was meant to be a twelve-week course. He was cutting wood for which he wore safety glasses, however he had only been there a week when his supervisor claimed he had been seen without the glasses, and sent him home. Bruce denies that he had removed his glasses, but he was sanctioned for two months with no money and had to survive off friends and family. He appealed but without success.

67) Dan (30) was sanctioned for two weeks for not doing enough job searches, and again for four weeks for being late for an appointment. He told us that he had not been given enough information about applying for Hardship Payments or about how to ensure his Housing Benefit still paid his rent. He felt the Jobcentre acted like a production line.

68) Gav (34) was sanctioned for six weeks over Christmas and New Year 2012-13 as a result of being in hospital for eight weeks for an operation on his feet due to bad circulation. (His feet were black and he was on crutches; he also suffers from epilepsy.) Gav was informed that he was at fault for missing his appointment. He had asked if financial help was available, but had received nothing. Gav then went to a lawyer, who wrote to the DWP informing them that he had been in hospital at the time of his appointment so could not attend. He told his Jobcentre advisor that a letter was on its way threatening legal action, and later that day his benefits were in his account, followed after two weeks by his backdated money.

69) Ally (33) was sanctioned for two weeks last Christmas for a job-search record that was less than required. He told us that he was diligent in his job searches, and this was the first time he had failed to fully comply with his Jobseeker's Agreement. He had put in a letter of appeal, but had heard nothing back.

70) Simon (20), who has learning difficulties and problems filling out forms, had been on JSA for two weeks and had been sanctioned for two weeks for failing to bring his job-search diary. The book had been in the flat he shares with his girlfriend; he had lost the key and his girlfriend had meant to come back to let him in but had not been able to make it. He had received £57 Hardship Payment.

71) Kieran (20) had been on JSA for three years and had been sanctioned 'loads of times'. On the last occasion he had missed an appointment by 2-3 minutes and had been sanctioned for 2-3 weeks. On another occasion the DWP claimed he had missed an appointment with Triage, but he had not received a letter. His sanctions have been added on to each other and when we spoke to him he had another two months of sanctions to run. He was waiting on responses to two letters of appeal.

72) Robbie (46) had been sanctioned twice. On the first occasion, he did not receive anything for two weeks and then Hardship Payment of £86 for a fortnight. The second sanction was 10-12 months ago, after he couldn't make a Triage appointment. Two days later he explained why he had missed the appointment, but this was not accepted. His appeal was rejected but he took it to an Independent Tribunal and won.

73) Nick had had to give up a job conditioning toilets due to the overpowering smell. He had been told that his claim had to be discussed. He was advised to get a letter from the manager of

the firm saying that this kind of job was not for everyone – there had been a number of people who could not do the job – and to look into any medical reasons for not accepting the job.

74) Phil had been sanctioned from 16th September for three months because he had not informed the Jobcentre that he would not be able to come to his interview on 4th September. He was at his father's funeral in Watford, and maintains the he did notify the Jobcentre by phone. He needed help with his electricity costs. He had written a letter of appeal.

75) Mick had been sanctioned for not applying for enough jobs. He is going to try to re-negotiate his Jobseeker's Agreement.

76) Ray (35) had been on and off JSA and ESA. He was sanctioned two years ago, while on JSA. He had been told to go to a job interview for a janitor's position, but could not make it as he was unwell. He was told later that he had been sanctioned.

77) Andrew (33) has multiple health problems and is on mirtazapine for severe depression, but had been recently been found fit to work by ATOS and moved to JSA. When we met him he thought that he might have been sanctioned for failing to provide evidence of seeking four jobs a week, as specified in his Jobseeker's Agreement, but he was not sure.

78) Sean is a single parent. He had recently been moved from ESA and come off a methadone programme. He was sanctioned for one month when he signed onto JSA for the first time as he had applied for a job on a building site without the requisite Construction Skills Certificate Scheme card. When we met him he was receiving Hardship Payments, and the Jobcentre were trying to force him onto Universal Jobmatch.

79) Angus was sanctioned for 13 weeks last year for missing an appointment, with another sanction imposed for not showing initiative in his job search.

80) Karen is a single parent and also a registered carer. She was sanctioned in June for being late for an interview. She admits to having problems working computers.

81) Bill (56) is a former merchant seaman who is proud of having served in the Falklands. When we met him on Tuesday 19th August he was in the middle of a two-week sanction. He lives on his own in a damp flat with a cooker where only the hobs work and a microwave that had packed up a few days earlier. Since being sanctioned the previous Thursday, he had received a parcel of food from a local food bank that was meant to last three days. He was left with one tin of soup and 17p in his pocket, which was meant to last him a week and a half until he received a Hardship Payment of about £45 a week. When he was walking with one of our activists to the Jobcentre, he had to stop repeatedly and lean against a wall or hedge in order to support himself. He was on the point of collapsing from lack of decent food. He told us he felt betrayed, but also increasingly worthless and of no value to a society that seemed to have no use for him anymore. Below is his successful appeal letter:

'I would like to appeal against the decision that was made to sanction me on Friday 15th August. I was informed by X, the adviser who I spoke with on Tuesday 19th August, that the reason for my being sanctioned was that I had not logged in to my Universal Job Match account, and that I had therefore failed to adhere to my 'claimant commitment agreement'. I have made it clear, repeatedly, to my advisers that I am virtually computer illiterate, nor do I have access to a computer at home or through friends and family. I am, therefore, forced to use the computer terminals in my local library, where I have, on occasion, been able to call on the help of other

library users, although I often have problems getting access to a computer and when I do I am not always able to get someone to help me. I feel strongly, that my present 'claimant commitment agreement' does not take into due account the acute problems that I face with regards to computer literacy, and the difficulties I sometimes experience in getting others to help me. This was known by my adviser at the time that I was urged to sign up to the Universal Job Match system, but I was not made aware that this system entailed a level of computer literacy that I do not possess. I was told, some weeks ago, by, Y, my adviser at that time, that he would sign me up for a course in basic computer literacy, but the issue was not raised with me again. I would, however, be quite prepared to take part in any course which might help me understand the use of computers. I might add that my problem with using computers has been aggravated by my very poor eyesight, which has become a particular problem following the loss of my prescription glasses two weeks ago.'

We were also told about other reasons for stopped benefits, and other concerns about Jobcentre practices:

DWP errors:

82) Jim (62) has been on ESA for approximately two years. He suffers from alcoholic neuropathy, which causes forgetfulness, incontinence and other symptoms. He became aware of a problem with his ESA when a payment did not go into his account as expected. When we met him he had contacted the Jobcentre on the phone and in person, but they couldn't tell him why his payment has stopped, just that there was an error in the system and they were attempting to fix it. Meanwhile, although he had been informed of the availability of the Crisis Loan, he had not been given the support he required to go through the application process, so he was not receiving any money and was relying on food banks. Jim had no electricity and was being pursued by debt collectors. The Jobcentre still couldn't tell him when his payments would be reinstated or why they were stopped.

83) Blair (33) suffers from anxiety disorder, which is accentuated by the reduction in his methadone dose as his prescription is tapered off. (His goal is to come off methadone entirely.) When we saw him he had been moved to JSA after six months on ESA. He had recently found his JSA unexpectedly stopped due to an office worker writing the wrong date on a form, which resulted in him losing two weeks' benefit. The mistake was not easily sorted out and involved many phone calls and trips to the Jobcentre. The resulting stress worsened his medical condition. Blair also explained that his Jobseeker's Agreement was not realistic for him. He had been pressed into agreeing to contact four employers speculatively per week, which worsens his medical condition and is not a suitable way for him to look for work.

Claimants receiving no benefits after being passed fit for work by ATOS:

84) Shona (21) has a congenital medical condition and had been on ESA for four years; however, her ATOS medical had recently classified her fit to work, and she was currently without income.

85) Susan had been getting ESA but had been passed as fit to work by ATOS and told to get JSA instead. Her ESA money had been stopped about three weeks before we talked to her, and she had received no benefits since then. She has mental health problems and pain and is appealing the ATOS decision. She had applied for a Crisis Grant and had come to the Jobcentre to ask for JSA.

86) Arthur (48), a single father of three, had been on ESA for around a year for various health issues, before being moved to JSA. (The ATOS assessors argued that because he was generally

able to get his children up and to school he would be able to work full time as well.) In the switch from ESA to JSA his payment was delayed. He received no benefits for six days and had to rely on family and friends.

Other concerns:

87) Malkie (30) received a letter round about March 2014 asking him to come to an interview with the fraud team. On attending, Malkie discovered that this had resulted from information provided by the BBC relating to his doing one day's work as an extra in *Bob Servant* in February 2012. He had not been paid for this work by the agency (United Castings, Glasgow), but had not informed the Jobcentre he was doing it. His claim was reduced by £100 as a result.

88) Ben (37) suffers from severe depression and takes mirtazapine. He was drug dependent, but is now on methadone, and wanting to reduce his dose further. He has been on ESA or JSA for three years. When he was shifted from ESA he fought this for two months, during which he received no money and was forced to use food banks and churches for food, and receive meter cards from Welfare Rights. When we talked with him he had been back on ESA (waiting an ATOS assessment) for two months, but had not received notification that his sick line was due from the doctor. He explained that the Jobcentre commonly do not send out notification of this requirement until the day you are meant to be paid, which means that you do not receive payment – and that this has happened to him 3-4 times in the last three years, the last time being three months ago. When this situation arises, Ben has to make an appointment first thing with the doctor to get a sick line, but he often has to wait till the next day for the first available appointment, and it often takes 2-3 days before the sick line is processed, and a further three working days until the money arrives in his Post Office account. As a result, Ben often has to go to food banks and to stay with sister in order to keep warm until the money comes through.

89) Morag (43) had recently signed on. She has mental health problems and felt the Jobcentre staff were 'negative and hostile'. She had been told that she had to use Universal Jobmatch and had to tick the box allowing the DWP to view her job searches. In fact Universal Jobmatch is only mandatory if expressly specified in a Jobseeker's Direction, and data protection law means that no-one can be made to give access to their job searches.

90) Ken had just gone into the Jobcentre to check that they had received his sick line, but a large security guard leaned over him and told him to get out.

91) Joyce (58) has multiple health problems, physical and mental, and recently lost her daughter in exceptionally tragic circumstances. However, ATOS has declared her fit to work, and although her doctor has written a note to say she is not fit, the Jobcentre won't accept it. She is being sent to Triage. She cares for her daughter who has learning difficulties and her three grandchildren, one of whom has behaviour problems and can't be left with the little one. She has various debts and has £29 a fortnight deducted from her benefits to pay back a Social Fund loan. Sometimes Joyce feels there is no point in living, but she has to go on for her grandchildren.

Appendix A

Copy of a letter of complaint relating to intimidatory tactics towards an SUWN advocate by Jobcentre staff and security personnel. (This incident occurred while helping with Bill's case, 81, above).

Darren Kelly,
Senior Operations Manager,
Wellgate Jobcentre
Dundee

19th August 2014

Dear Mr Kelly

Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network would like to make an official complaint about a serious incident that occurred in Wellgate Jobcentre during the afternoon of Tuesday 19th August.

I had been asked to accompany a claimant, Bill Smith, to a meeting with his adviser, A, in order to discuss his Job Seeker's Agreement. Mr Smith had been sanctioned but not informed why. When I asked about the reason for the sanction, the adviser offered no explanation and objected to my asking questions. He then informed us that he would hand over the case to his line manager.

We were then handed over to the line manager, B. Initially, the discussion seemed to be going quite well, with progress being made with regards to Mr Smith's urgent need for financial help through the medium of the Hardship Allowance. B informed Mr Smith that she would leave us for a few minutes in order to investigate the possibility of fast-tracking his Hardship Allowance claim. However, when she returned, her attitude towards Mr Smith's situation, and towards me in particular, seemed to have undergone a dramatic transformation. She informed me that I had no right to ask questions on Mr Smith's behalf or to contribute in any manner whatsoever towards the discussion. I protested that I had been asked by Mr Smith to act as his representative in the meeting. At a certain point, B objected to my speaking at all.

I realise that it is not the role of the representative to put words into the claimant's mouth, however, I was merely asking points of clarification regarding B's continuing refusal to confirm in writing why Mr Smith had actually been sanctioned. I believe that it is wholly unreasonable to expect a representative to sit silently through a meeting of this kind, when claimants do not find it easy to question an authority figure who has the power to cut off their only means of support – as Mr Smith's support has been cut off for over five days.

The meeting began to take an even more serious turn when I noticed that I had been approached by a security guard who was staring fixedly at me, and when I turned round I realised that there was another security guard standing directly behind me. When I objected to the totally needless presence of these two security guards, B informed me that the police would be called to remove me. When I again attempted to ask a question of B, she threatened to have the security guards forcefully remove me from the premises. At this point, an outraged benefit claimant, who was accompanied by her small child, intervened by complaining loudly about the manner in which Mr Smith and I were being treated by the line manager, B. Following this interjection, the threat to eject me evaporated and was replaced by a more reasonable approach towards Mr Smith's predicament - which, however, fell short of resolving the situation with his

sanction (see accompanying copy of Mr Smith's 'application for revision of an outcome decision').

At all times, I conducted myself in a polite but firm manner, and the only reason given by B for threatening to have me removed was my attempts to ask questions of her on behalf of Mr Smith. Our organisation is very disturbed by this development, which, we feel, shows a lack of respect for claimants and their essential right to be accompanied into meetings with the authorities by a representative of their own choosing. The effect of this incident on Mr Smith was also palpable, as, in the immediate aftermath, he complained of feeling intimidated by the actions of the DWP line manager, B, in threatening to call the police and by the intimidatory attitude of the security staff towards his designated representative.

We underline our commitment to supporting good relations between Job Centre staff and benefit claimants, but we will not stand for the bullying attitude shown towards myself on this occasion.

The Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network request a full apology for this outrageous treatment, along with a written assurance that, in future, claimants' rights to a representative will be duly recognised and that such incidents as this will not be repeated.

Over the last weeks, we have been in discussions with both Dundee MPs about the worrying level of sanctions at the Wellgate Jobcentre, and we are also sending them a copy of this letter.

Appendix B

Experience of someone else who tried to offer someone else help in Dundee Jobcentre

M was waiting to sign on himself and saw another claimant having problems. The claimant, who appeared to have limited understanding about what was going on, was being sanctioned for not giving the exact dates he had applied for work although everything was recorded under the correct weeks. M told the claimant to ensure that the reason for the sanction was written down as he felt there might be grounds for appeal. But when he spoke, a DWP worker with a security guard came up to him and told him not to get involved. M said that the other claimant, who was speaking with him, needed advice, but was told to move seats. When he refused to move, the guard told him that if he didn't move he'd be evicted.

With thanks

to everyone who gave us their stories,

and to the volunteers who collected the statements:

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