

Universal Credit Sanctions Report

A collaboration between Citizens Advice
charities in North East England



**citizens
advice**

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- Citizens Advice County Durham
- Citizens Advice Darlington, Redcar and Cleveland
- Citizens Advice Gateshead
- Citizens Advice Hartlepool
- Citizens Advice Middlesbrough
- Citizens Advice Newcastle
- Citizens Advice North Tyneside
- Citizens Advice Northumberland
- Citizens Advice South Tyneside
- Citizens Advice Stockton
- Citizens Advice Sunderland

Finally, we acknowledge the support of the Department for Work and Pensions and regional colleagues in helping to inform and support this work.

Executive Summary

This report examines the relationship between public transport and Universal Credit (UC) sanctions in the **North East**, drawing on **survey responses from 429** claimants and **in-depth interviews** with people with lived experience of sanctions.

The findings show that public transport can be a significant barrier to attending Jobcentre appointments. Around **90% of sanctions are issued for “failure to attend or participate in a mandatory interview”**. **45% of surveyed claimants use public transport to reach their appointments**, and many respondents said they find **phone appointments more convenient**, often because they avoid the cost and unreliability of travelling to the Jobcentre.

The research shows that the current system **often fails to accommodate sudden and unavoidable changes in circumstances**. The most commonly reported reason for missing an appointment was personal circumstances (31.4%), followed by public transport issues (27.8%). Interviewees described being sanctioned despite experiencing events such as illness or urgent childcare responsibilities on the day of the appointment. These accounts suggest that sanctions **often arise not from disengagement, but from rigid processes that do not respond well to sudden and unavoidable challenges**.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that **reducing sanctions requires more than public transport reform alone**. It requires a more flexible and claimant-centred approach. This report therefore recommends the following policy changes:

1. **Introduce personalised and flexible appointment systems** by assessing claimant needs and preferences at the start as well as periodically throughout a claim to remove barriers, using in-person or remote appointments accordingly.
2. **Broaden “good reason” criteria** for missed appointments to include sudden caring responsibilities and public transport disruption.

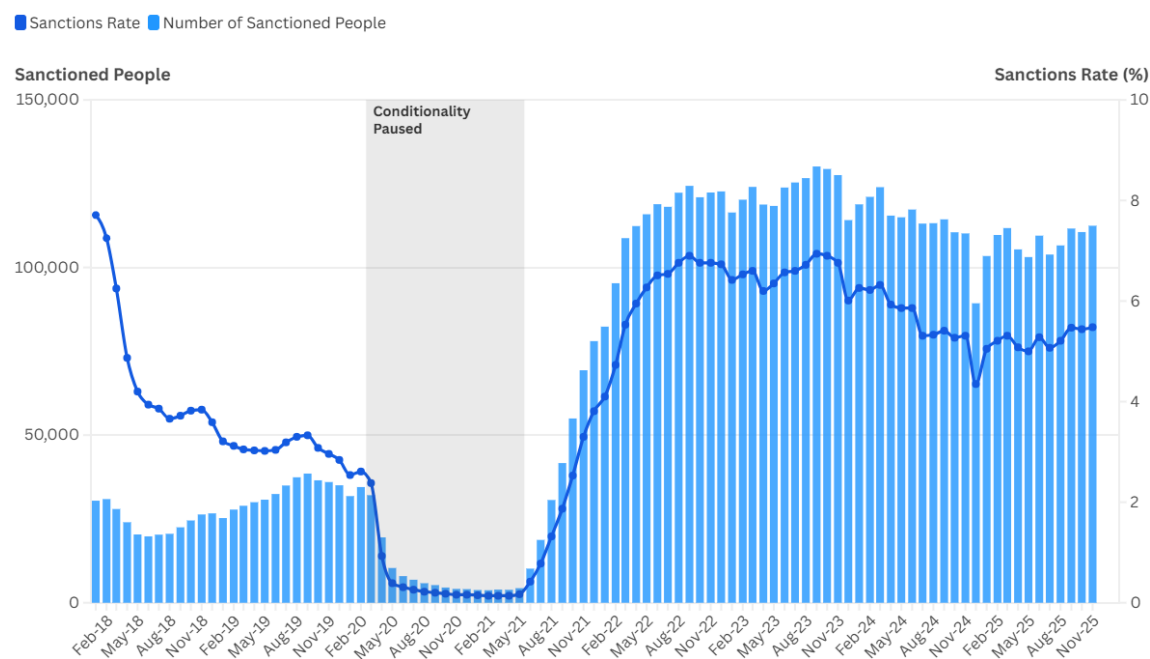
3. **Improve awareness and access to travel support** by promoting schemes such as the Jobcentre Plus Travel Discount Card and Flexible Support Fund, as well as extending support to include bus fare discounts.
4. **Establish a regional sanctions forum** involving regional DWP colleagues, Citizens Advice local offices, and other partners to identify systemic issues early and prevent avoidable harm.

Introduction and Background

Universal Credit (UC) is a benefit that is designed to encourage people of working age, on low incomes, to transition to full-time work. A condition of this benefit is to agree to a set of requirements called 'work-related conditionality'. These requirements can range from meeting with a work coach on a weekly basis to actively researching and applying for jobs. Failure to meet these requirements could result in a sanction, where the claimant loses all or part of their Universal Credit Standard Allowance payments for a period. Please note that some people of working age cannot be sanctioned because they are in the 'no work-related requirements group', for example due to severe illness or disability.

During Covid-19 these conditionalities were paused as it was impossible to attend in-person meetings with work coaches. However, after the reintroduction of conditionality, there has been a sharp increase in both the number and the percentage of claimants under sanction. The rates of sanctioned¹ people are now far higher compared to pre-pandemic levels and have remained high.

Graph 1: Number of people under sanction and the sanctions rate in Great Britain by month



Source: [Stat - Xplore - UC Sanctions Rate](#)

¹ DWP (2026) [Benefit Sanctions statistics to November 2025](#)

On top of the rising sanctions rate, historically the North East (NE) has seen a higher sanction rate compared to the rest of the country, with the exception of the North West.

Table 1: Sanctions rate in regions of England

English Regions	Average Monthly Sanctions Rate, 2025 (Jan - Nov)
North West	6.30%
North East	6.25%
Yorkshire and The Humber	5.85%
East of England	5.31%
East Midlands	5.25%
South East	5.24%
London	4.60%
South West	4.55%
West Midlands	4.09%

Source: [Stat - Xplore - UC Sanctions Rate](#)

Sanctions reduce the income of those who claim Universal Credit, sometimes to £0. Many are forced to turn to food banks and seek crisis support to make ends meet as a result of a reduced income. Sanctions can create a cycle of hardship, as those who are sanctioned often already face hardships due to pre-existing debt, housing issues and health problems. Our advisers have seen cases where people could not cover their housing costs and were exposed to a greater risk of homelessness as a result of enforced sanctions. The loss of income can also exacerbate mental health distress. For these reasons, as local Citizens Advice offices in the North East, we wanted to better understand the causes, impacts and

potential policy solutions that could be established to support our clients who have been sanctioned in the region.

Kasper* is sanctioned for missing a work-focused interview. The original interview was cancelled by the work coach, and he didn't know he had to reschedule another interview due to limited English comprehension. After the sanction he only has **£150 a month to pay all of his essential expenditure.**

Kasper is **struggling to maintain all essential expenditure.** He also has rent arrears which are increasing due to him not being able to afford his rent.

(*) Names have been changed to protect anonymity

There is evidence from as far back as 2013 of sanctions causing severe impact to both mental and physical health^{2,3}. The harm that sanctions cause was also acknowledged by the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee's 19th Report of the 2017-19 Session⁴.

A Universal Credit work-focused interview is a meeting between a claimant and a work coach in which the claimant discusses their employment prospects, work-related activities, and the support available to help them move towards employment. These interviews may take place in person, by telephone, or via video call, and attendance is often required as a condition of receiving full benefits. There are several different types of work-focused interviews and other interview types, for the purposes of this research 'work coach appointment' or 'appointments' are used to refer to meetings between work coaches and claimants.

Some of our advisers have started to see clients who couldn't attend their appointments due not having enough money to cover travel costs to the Jobcentre.

² Manchester CABx Cluster Group (2013) [Punishing Poverty? A review of benefits sanctions and their impact on clients and claimants](#)

³ Serena Pattaro et. al (2022) [The Impacts of Benefit Sanctions: A Scoping Review of the Quantitative Research Evidence](#)

⁴ House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2018) [Benefit Sanctions](#)

Jackie* came to Citizens Advice Newcastle to seek advice on a sanction she received. She got the sanction as she couldn't attend her job centre appointment due to **not having enough money** to travel to the Jobcentre.

Jackie said that she did write on her journal about missing the appointment and **spoke to someone on the phone**, they did say that they will make another appointment, but they haven't and **she has now been sanctioned**.

Jackie asked for a **food voucher**, as she also **didn't have enough money to buy food for her two young children**.

(*) Names have been changed to protect anonymity

Looking at the reasoning for sanctions, Table 2 reveals a more alarming picture. According to DWP data, 90% of all sanction decisions taken are due to "Failure to Attend or Participate in a Mandatory Interview", compared to 5% of sanction decisions due to "Availability for Work", which includes the reason of failing to undertake job searches. This, combined with the sharp increase in sanction rates, the experiences of our advisers and the potential severe harm that sanctions can cause led us to conduct this research into the causes and impacts of sanctions as well as the role that public transportation plays for people complying with their work coach appointments.

Table 2: Percentage of sanction decisions by reason of sanction

Reason	Oct-25	Nov-25	Dec-25	Jan-26
Availability for work	5%	5%	5%	4%
Employment programmes	3%	4%	4%	4%
Reason for leaving previous employment	1%	1%	2%	1%
Failure to attend or participate in a mandatory interview	90%	90%	89%	91%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: [Stat - Xplore - Universal Credit Full Service Sanction Decisions](#)

Methodology

This research had two components. Firstly, a survey was designed to investigate the link between public transportation, work coach appointments and Universal Credit (UC) claimants being sanctioned and, secondly, interviews were conducted with Citizens Advice clients in the North East to better understand how sanctions affect people across the region.

The surveys were gathered from February to December 2025. All 11 local Citizens Advice offices in the North East of England participated by distributing the surveys to their clients. The survey was further publicised by collective social media posts, encouraging people on Universal Credit in the North East to take part. To ensure quality, the first question of the survey asked whether the respondent had claimed Universal Credit in the last 2 years and anyone who answered 'no' was removed from the research findings.

At the end of the survey, the respondents had the option of leaving their contact information to take part in a further interview. Two interviewees were randomly selected from each Local Authority area in the region to take part in the research interviews.

Survey Results

Survey Representativeness and Demographics

The North East has an estimated population of around 2.7 million⁵. When surveying a population of this size, it is not necessary to collect responses from every individual; instead, statistical methods can be used to determine a sample size that yields reliable estimates.

Using a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, a minimum sample size of 385 responses is typically required. This means that the survey results are expected to fall within ± 5 percentage points of the true population values in 95% of cases.

This survey received 429 responses, exceeding the recommended minimum. As a result, the findings are statistically robust in terms of sample size. However, sample size alone does not guarantee that the results are representative of the wider population.

⁵ ONS (2025): [Estimates of the population for England and Wales](#)

Table 3: Local authority distribution in the sample

Local Authority	Count of People (in the sample)	Percentage of People (in the sample)	Percentage of UC claimants in NE (2026 Feb) *
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	110	25.6%	11.4%
Middlesbrough	63	14.7%	7.2%
Northumberland	62	14.5%	9.2%
Sunderland	45	10.5%	11.7%
South Tyneside	44	10.3%	6.3%
Gateshead	43	10.0%	7.4%
Darlington	16	3.7%	3.7%
Durham	13	3.0%	19.5%
North Tyneside	7	1.6%	6.5%
Redcar and Cleveland	7	1.6%	5.5%
Stockton	7	1.6%	6.9%
Hartlepool	5	1.2%	4.6%
<i>Prefer not to say</i>	7	1.6%	

(*) Source: [Stat - Xplore - UC Sanctions Rate](#)

As seen in Table 3, the sample is not very representative of the local authorities in the North East. It over represents the residents of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Middlesbrough and South Tyneside, and it underrepresents the residents of Durham, North Tyneside and Stockton. As a result, the generalisability of the findings is somewhat limited. To account for this, the results of the survey are weighted by Local Authority proportion. Meaning that, since Newcastle is overrepresented and Stockton are underrepresented, answers from Newcastle are weighted less and answers from Stockton are weighted more.

Table 4: Gender distribution in the sample

Gender	Percentage of People (in the sample)	Percentage of People (in the sample) (excluding prefer not to say)	Percentage of UC claimants in NE (Feb 2026) *
Female	49.0%	53.3%	56.3%
Male	42.9%	46.7%	43.7%
<i>Prefer not to say</i>	8.1%		

(*) Source: [Stat - Xplore - UC Sanctions Rate](#)

As seen in Table 4, the gender distribution of the sample is close to the actual gender distribution of UC claimants in the North East.

Table 5: Age distribution in the sample

Age Group	Count of People (in the sample)	Percentage of People (in the sample)	Percentage of UC claimants in NE (Feb 2026) *
16 - 19	2	0.5%	2.4%
20 - 29	78	18.2%	18.0%
30 - 39	113	26.3%	26.5%
40 - 49	90	21.0%	23.1%
50 - 59	75	17.5%	18.5%
Over 60	41	9.6%	11.5%
<i>Prefer not to say</i>	30	7.0%	

(*) Source: [Stat - Xplore - UC Sanctions Rate](#)

As seen in Table 5, the age distribution in the sample is very close to the actual age distribution of UC claimants in the North East. There might be a very slight skew towards younger people, but not enough to call it unrepresentative.

Table 6: Ethnicity distribution in the sample

Ethnicity	Count of People (in the sample)	Percentage of People (in the sample)
Arab	8	1.9%
Asian	25	5.8%
Black	63	14.7%
Mixed	21	4.9%
Other	6	1.4%
White	260	60.6%
<i>Prefer not to say</i>	46	10.7%

Table 6 shows the ethnicity distribution of UC claimants in the sample. There are no official statistics on the distribution of UC claimants, or those sanctioned, by ethnicity. However, the below seems not to match the ethnicity distribution of the North East, which is around 93% white⁶, and the clients of Local Citizens Advice offices which is usually over 80% white, in terms of ethnicity. However, a poll conducted by National Citizens Advice in June 2023 shows that racially minoritised people tend to be disproportionately sanctioned more compared to white people⁷. In the same report, looking at the national database, it was found that black people are overrepresented relative to the population for those seeking help with UC and sanctions. Without official statistics it is hard to determine if the sample is representative of UC claimants or those being sanctioned in terms of ethnicity.

Consequently, the sample does have enough respondents to make reliable estimates. However, some local authorities are overrepresented in the sample. To mitigate any bias, the answers of each responder were weighted by their location, using the sample % and population %. For example, 25.5% of survey responders

⁶ NOMIS (2021) [Nort East Region](#)

⁷ Dr. Kate Harrison (2023) [The sanctions spiral](#)

are from Newcastle-upon-Tyne but 11.4% of UC claimants in the North East are from Newcastle, so responses from Newcastle are multiplied by $11.4 / 25.5 \approx 0.45$).

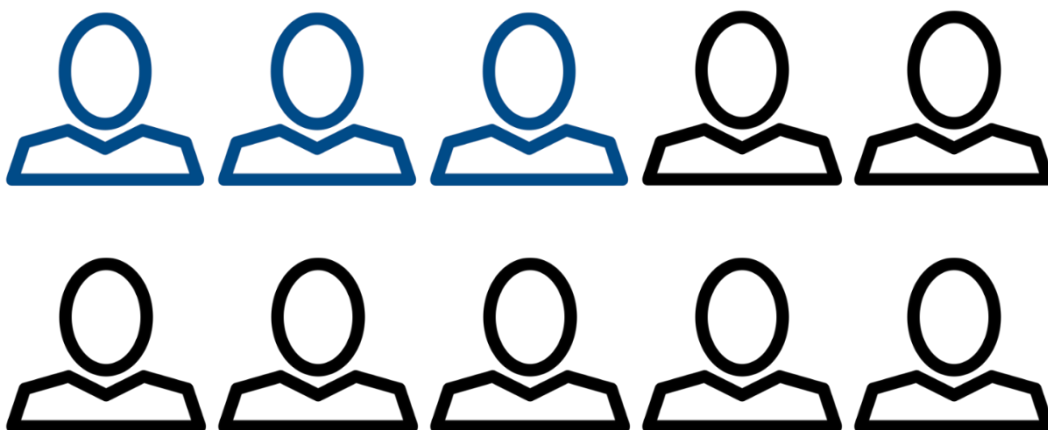
Initial Results

Our survey respondents are those who live in the North East and have claimed Universal Credit in the past 2 years.

39.6% said that they either missed an appointment or could not attend their work coach appointment in the last 2 years. That's nearly 2 in 5.

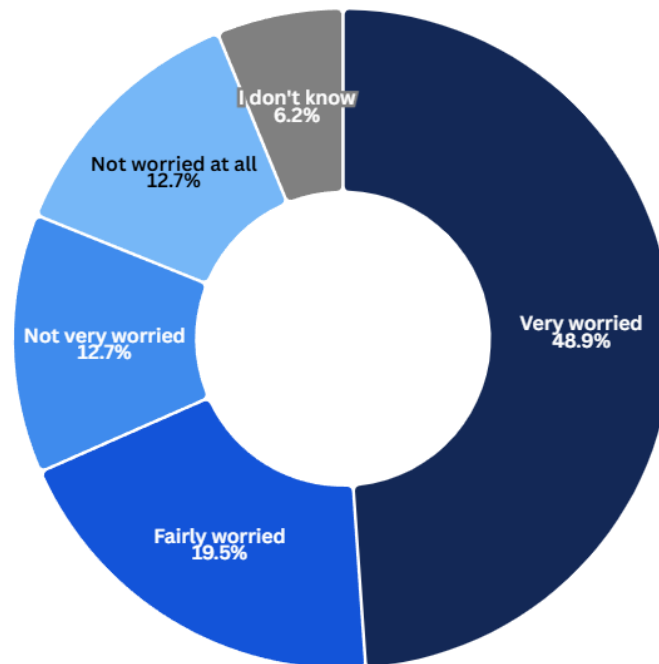


30.3% said that they had been sanctioned in the last 2 years. That's 3 in 10.



Graph 2: Weighted percentages of people who are worried about getting sanctioned

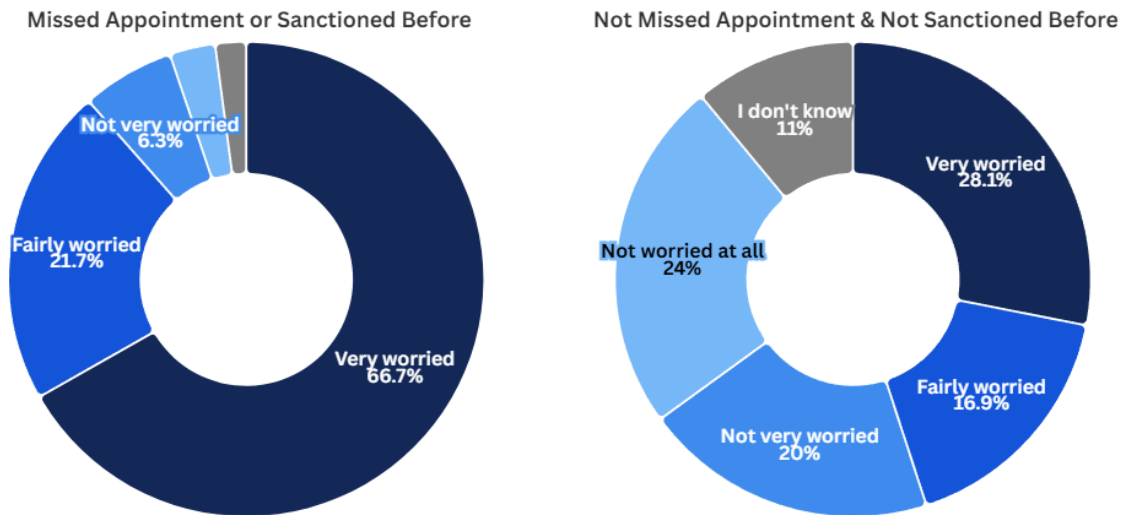
How worried are you, if at all, about being sanctioned by Universal Credit?



When asked how worried people are about getting sanctioned, most people, 48.9%, said, "Very Worried". In total, 68.4% of people surveyed, over two thirds, are "Fairly Worried" or "Very Worried" about being sanctioned in the future. However, the sample has a mix of people: those who have and haven't been sanctioned previously and those who have and haven't missed an appointment. It is possible that these two groups of people might answer the above question differently. To investigate this further the same graph is created but broken down by those who have been sanctioned or missed an appointment and those who have not been sanctioned or missed an appointment.

Graph 3: Weighted percentages of people who are worried about getting sanctioned by status of previously missing an appointment and/or being sanctioned before

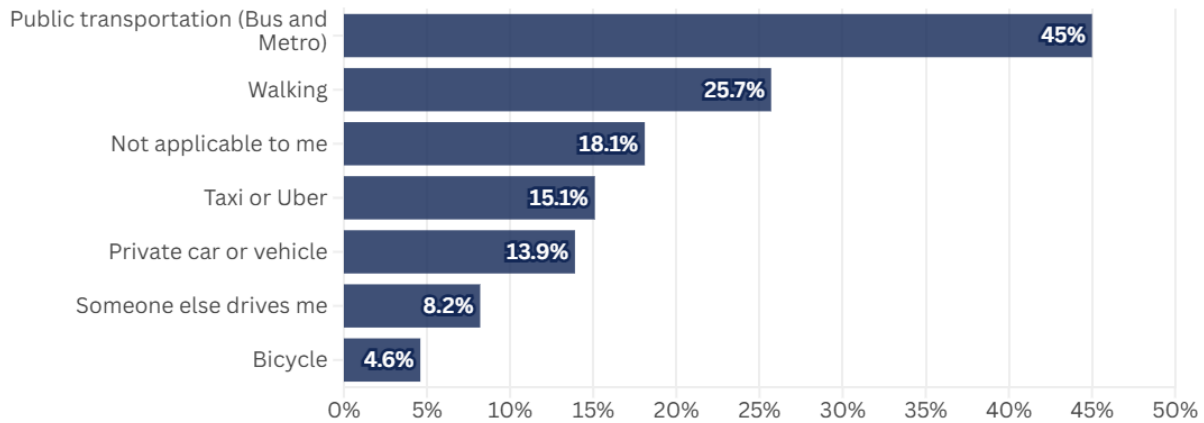
How worried are you, if at all, about being sanctioned by Universal Credit?



Unsurprisingly, people who have previously missed an appointment or have been sanctioned before are much more worried about getting sanctioned in the future. However, among those who haven't missed an appointment or haven't been sanctioned before, a sizable number of them are still worried about being sanctioned. 28.1% of the second group are still "Very Worried" about getting sanctioned and a further 16.9%, of a total of 45%, are at least "Fairly Worried" about being sanctioned.

Graph 4: Travel method to the Jobcentre by people claiming Universal Credit, weighted percentage

How do you usually travel to your work coach appointments?



Note: the percentages may not add up to 100% because this is a multiple - choice question and some respondents said that they use multiple travel methods.

45% of those surveyed travel to their Jobcentre appointments via public transportation. Any change in local public transportation, either positive or negative, could have an impact on UC claimants' ability to attend their work coach appointments.

A quarter of the respondents also mentioned that they walk to their Jobcentre appointments. In later questions, two respondents said that they prefer walking rather than using public transportation even if it takes longer to get to the Jobcentre.

I would have to walk for either 45 minutes or catch a bus, [but] it wasn't reimbursed.

A bus pass would be handy, then I wouldn't walk that long.

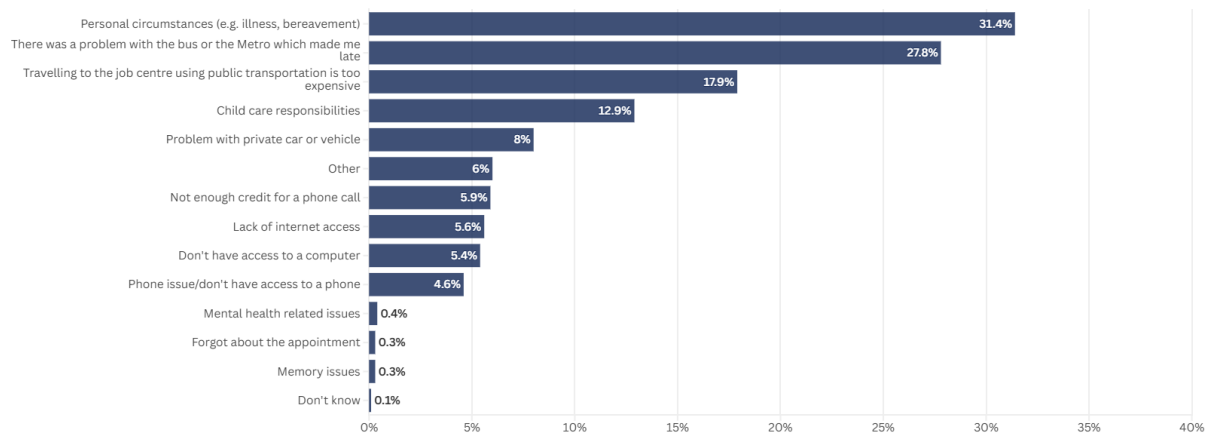
The responses suggest that the cost and availability of public transport led some individuals to walk to their Jobcentre appointments. However, this does not apply to all respondents who walk, as many indicated that their Jobcentre was simply within walking distance. The scale of the problem is unknown as the survey does not measure the extent to which walking is a matter of preference as opposed to a response to the cost or availability of public transport. Yet, this does show that

claimants do whatever they can to attend their appointments, even taking the extra time and effort to walk to the job centre.

Graph 5: Reasons for missing an appointment, weighted percentage

If you have missed an appointment with your work coach, what were the reasons for it?

If you have missed an appointment with your work coach, what were the reasons for it?



Note: For the graph above the percentages may not add up to 100% because this is a multiple-choice question and some respondents marked multiple reasons.

Among the top reasons why people claiming Universal Credit couldn't make it to their appointment are due to personal circumstances and public transportation. Over 1 in 4 Universal Credit Claimants who missed their appointment in the survey said that it was due to public transportation making them late. Furthermore, 17.9% of them also claim that it was the cost of public transportation that meant that they could not attend their appointments. This further shows how public transportation can be a barrier for UC claimants to attend their appointments and thus make it more likely for them to be sanctioned. There is a more detailed analysis of how and why this is the case in the 'Causes of Sanctions' section.

The respondent's that said "Other" to this question gave the following reasons:

Didn't get the usual reminder	Mixed up different appointments	Getting arrested
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Changes in work shifts clashing with the appointment	A disabled person not having someone to drive them to the Jobcentre	Talking to an employer (missed a phone appointment)
Health conditions	Under the influence of drugs	The work coach did not phone at the correct time
Miscommunication	Working away (self-employed).	Was abroad at the time

When further asked “What would help you to not miss your work coach appointments, or make them easier to attend?” the respondents mentioned things like:

A private car	More frequent buses	Bus pass/travel support
More reliable bus schedule	Plenty of notice to arrange childcare	Text or email reminders
Not needing to travel to the Jobcentre	More flexible scheduling	Being able to choose the time of the appointment
Being able to switch to online or phone appointments if I can't make it to the Jobcentre at the last minute	Having appointments on the weekend due to work requirements	Easier contact with the work coach

The initial results show that the reliability of public transport may be a barrier for UC claimants to attend their mandatory appointments. 45% of respondents said that they use public transport to get to their appointments and over 1 in 3 respondents said that they have missed an appointment due to public transportation. Therefore, investment in public transportation to improve the reliability of existing services may lead to reduced sanction rates in the North East.

However, transport is not the only factor affecting attendance. As shown in Graph 4, the most common reason for missed appointments relate to personal circumstances. One reason why personal circumstances appear to have a greater impact than problems with public transportation (excluding cost) is that they are often sudden and unpredictable. Situations such as illness or bereavement arise unexpectedly, leaving little or no opportunity to prepare. A similar issue can be seen with childcare responsibilities, which may also occur at short notice; when these situations arise, individuals often have no realistic option other than missing their appointment.

In contrast, the unreliability of public transportation is generally well known. Because of this, people are often able to plan ahead by taking an earlier bus or walking, even if it takes longer. As a result, when problems with public transport occur, many individuals have already accounted for potential delays and are still able to attend their appointment. Personal circumstances, however, rarely allow for this level of preparation, meaning people are much less able to react in time.

This pattern is further reflected in the range of “Other” reasons given for missing an appointment, many of which also involve unexpected events, miscommunication, or circumstances beyond an individual’s immediate control. Consequently, greater flexibility and the ability to reschedule appointments would help reduce non-attendance in the table above. The next section will examine this issue in more detail.

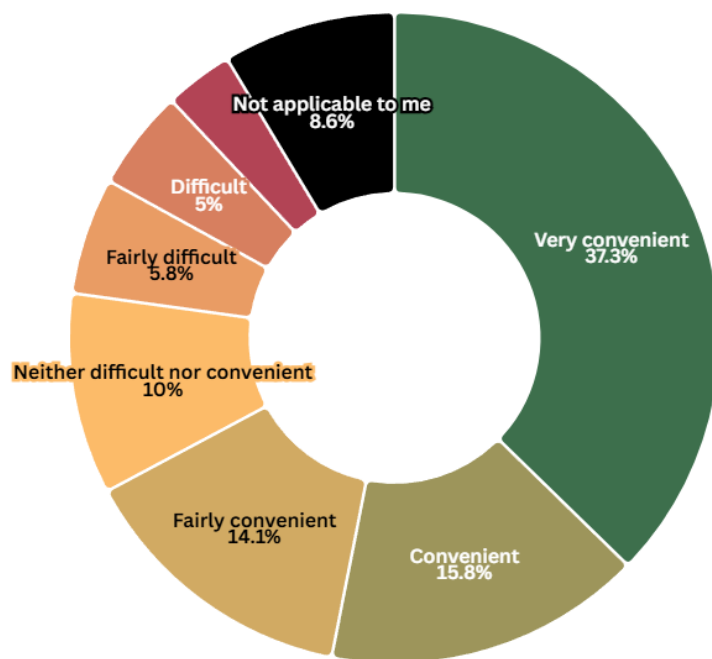
Appointment Types

Another area of interest are the appointment types themselves. Currently, in-person appointments are the main default option, it is up to the claimant to request phone or online appointments⁸. However, from experiences of our advisers it seems that some people are not aware that they can request a different appointment type. Therefore, an argument can be made that if people were asked if they would like a remote appointment (via phone or online) then both the cost

⁸ DWP (2025) [Manage your Universal Credit claim after you apply](#)

and reliability of public transportation wouldn't be a problem. This section investigates claimants' opinions of different appointment types available. They are asked to rate each appointment type to be "Convenient" or "Difficult" to attend.

Graph 6: Sentiment towards phone appointments, weighted percentages
To what extent do you find phone appointments difficult or convenient to attend?



Most respondents find phone appointments to be a relatively convenient contact method, with only the minority, 8.4%, finding them to be difficult at all. On top of this, 37% of people find them to be "Very Convenient". Considering that phone appointments require less time, effort and money by the claimants to attend, it could be a suitable new alternative that reduces sanction rates. Many people who said "not applicable to me" clarified that they had never had a phone appointment and chose not to answer this question.

When asked to further clarify their answers, the people who find it convenient mentioned things like:

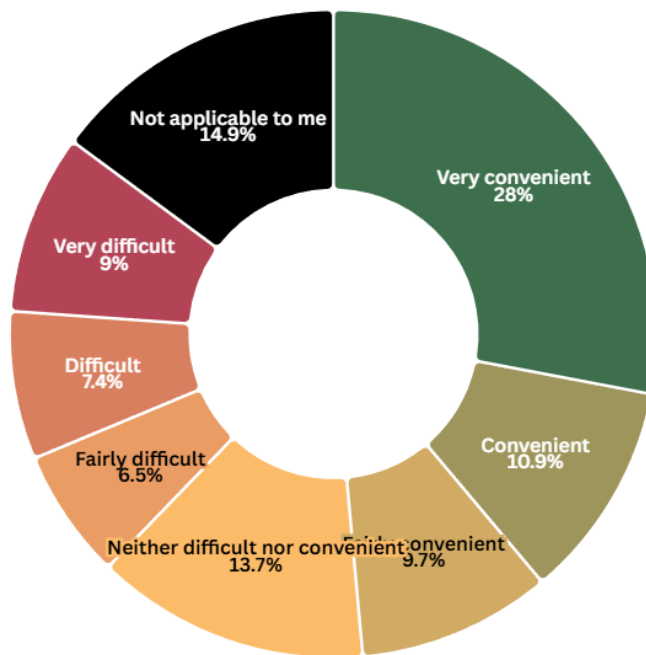
Don't need to leave their children	It's easier than walking or taking public transport	It doesn't take as much time and effort
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It is more comfortable to speak on the phone	It is safer	It is more flexible
It can better fit around work schedules	It is easier due to mobility issues	It is hard to miss (the appointment)
It is easier due to mental health or anxiety about going outside	Don't need to wait for the work coach at the Jobcentre	It is easier to manage when I have other appointments like GP appointments

On the other hand, people who find phone appointments difficult mentioned things like:

Anxiety speaking over the phone	Don't always have enough credit for a phone call	Language barriers
Being deaf or hearing difficulties	Having a call might be difficult due to attending to children	Technical issues or waiting for a long time to get through

Graph 7: Sentiment towards online appointments, weighted percentages
To what extent do you find online appointments difficult or convenient to attend?



Sentiment towards online appointments is mainly positive, with 48.6% of people finding them to be at least “Fairly Convenient”. However, the percentage of people who find them to be difficult rose in comparison to phone appointments. This suggests that people, for the most part, are willing to have online appointments, but some would struggle. This is more apparent when looking at their explanation of their answers.

People who find it convenient mentioned things like:

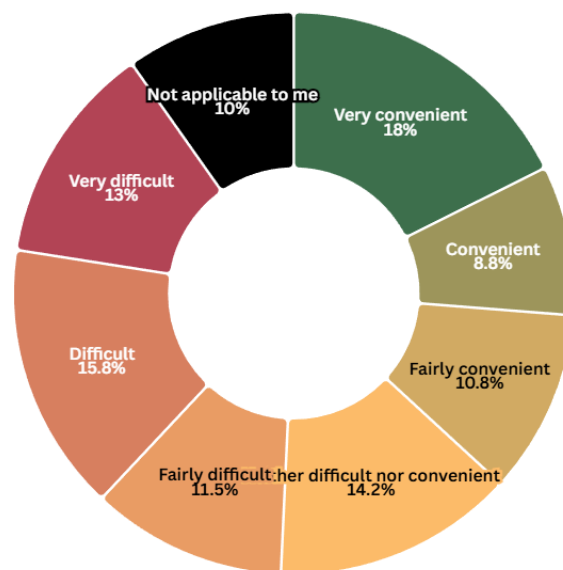
Comfort and safety of attending an appointment from home	It is more flexible	It is easier than attending an in-person appointment
Don't need to take public transport	It is easier to fit around daily routines	Less time-consuming than in-person appointments
Some online appointment programmes give you multiple reminders		Don't need to travel to the Jobcentre

On the other hand, people who find online appointments difficult mentioned things like:

Digital illiteracy	Worries about tech issues	Poor internet connection
Social anxiety about video calls	Hearing difficulties	Lack of access to a computer
Cost of accessing the internet		

Graph 8: Sentiment towards in-person appointments, weighted percentages

To what extent do you find in-person or face-to-face appointments difficult or convenient to attend?



For in-person appointments, there is no consensus opinion. There are nearly as many people who find it “Fairly Convenient” as there are people who find it “Fairly Difficult”. This suggests that the suitability of in-person appointments heavily depends on personal circumstances. This is more apparent when looking at the respondent’s further comments on in-person appointments.

People who found it convenient mentioned things like:

It is easier/prefer to talk face-to-face	The Jobcentre is close by	Claimants can be more involved
Less communication issues	Information shared face-to-face isn't recorded	

Although, the number of unique reasons given by people who prefer in-person is small, these reasons were repeated by many different people.

On the other hand, people who found in person appointments difficult mentioned things like:

Public transportation isn't reliable	Lack of childcare facilities in the Jobcentre	Shyness/social anxiety
Physical and/or mental health related issues	Worrying about missing the appointment	Unsympathetic or unhelpful work coaches
Hard to find childcare at the last minute	Limited mobility	Travelling to the Jobcentre is difficult
Appointments already feel like a checkbox exercise so the extra time	Effort and money it takes for an in-person appointment feels unnecessary	

Overall, phone appointments seem to be the most convenient to UC claimants in the North East, followed by online and in-person appointments. Many people further elaborated that they prefer remote appointments specifically because they avoid using public transport.

However, making phone appointments the new default option doesn't seem the right solution. Some people do have legitimate reasons why they don't want phone appointments like anxiety, the cost of phone calls and hearing difficulties. Making phone appointments the new default option would replace old barriers with new barriers. It would be better for work coaches to take a more proactive approach and ask their claimants what their preferred appointment type is in their first work coach meeting. Even if claimants have to come to the Jobcentre in

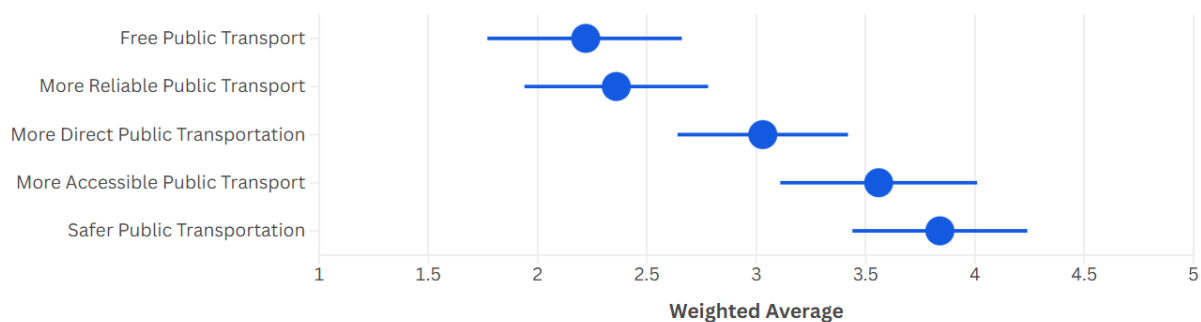
person for some of their meetings, tailoring other meetings to individual needs and preferences could significantly reduce people’s chances of getting sanctioned.

Improvements to Public Transportation

One question asked respondents to rank 5 different improvements to public transportation that would help them to attend their in-person appointments. Unfortunately, only 50 people ranked all 5 in their responses, so only those responses are used in this analysis.

Graph 9: Weighted average ranking and 95% confidence intervals for each improvement to public transportation, 1 being the most helpful and 5 being the least helpful

Rank these improvements to public transportation from 1 to 5, with 1 being the ‘most helpful’ and 5 being the ‘least helpful’, in helping you attend an in-person appointment with your work coach



As seen above, the top two improvements mentioned that would help UC claimants to attend their appointments were “Free Public Transport” and “More Reliable Public Transport”, having an average ranking of 2.22 and 2.36 respectively. Although it seems that people prefer free public transportation over more reliable public transport, comparing their average ranking reveals that with 95% certainty, there isn’t enough evidence to prove people prefer one over the other.

Similarly, it seems that people prefer “More Accessible Public Transport” over “Safer Public Transport”. However, with 95% certainty, there isn’t enough evidence to prove that people prefer one over the other.

In other words, with the evidence we have, we can say that people prefer “Free Public Transportation” and “More Reliable Public Transportation” as a joint most helpful improvement in attending their in-person work coach appointments. UC claimants prefer “More Direct Public Transportation” as the second preferred improvement. Finally, “More Accessible Public Transport” and “Safer Public Transportation” as the joint third most helpful improvement to public transport. These could be seen as the priority areas that UC claimants want to see as improvements made to public transportation in the North East.

Opinions of Free Public Transport

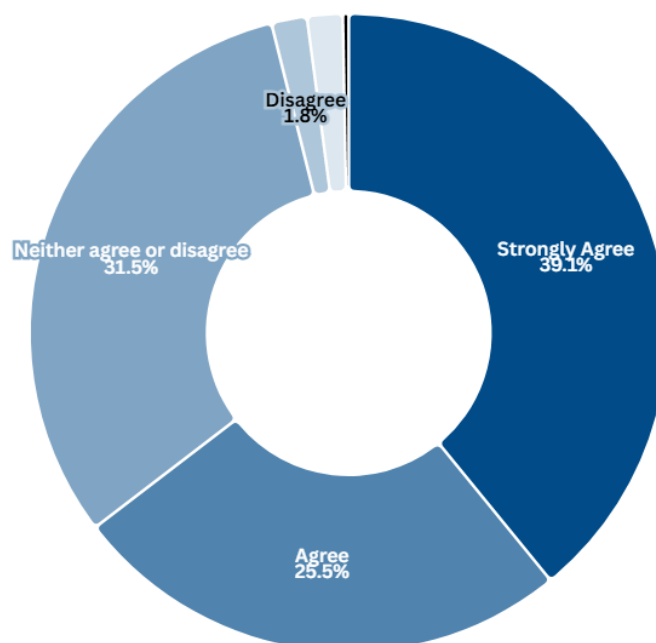
This research was conducted due to concerns raised by advisers that some of our clients were getting sanctioned because they had to choose between their bus fare or spending that money on other essentials, including food for their children. The above analysis has given us answers which highlight that the cost of public transport can be a barrier for a significant number of UC claimants on attending their work coach appointments across the North East.

As a last piece of evidence, the opinions of UC claimants on free public transportation in the region are collected.

Graph 10: Opinion of free public transportation, weighted percentage

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Access to free public transport would reduce the chance of me getting sanctioned for not attending a work coach appointment."

Strongly Agree Agree Neither agree or disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree Preferer not to say



The above graph shows that the majority of those surveyed at least agree that access to free public transportation would reduce their chances of being sanctioned in the future. This means that, for the majority of UC claimants, free

public transportation for those travelling to their work coach appointments and other training/courses promoted by the Jobcentre is a viable policy option to reduce sanctions rates. However, 31.5% of UC claimants believe that free public transportation won't really impact their chances of being sanctioned, suggesting that the cost of public transportation may not be the only barrier to people attending their appointments and that other barriers, including reliability of public transport and tailoring the contact channel for work coach appointments, needs to be improved. This is more evident when looking at people's further comments to this question.

The people who agreed with the statement mentioned:

Cost of public transportation can be high	It would make it easier for people who don't have cars	Sometimes I am left with no money
I can start taking the bus instead of walking	If you are sanctioned and have no money for the bus fare, then you are liable for more sanctions, and it becomes a vicious spiral	It would relieve worry/stress about money problems, and it would help as I need to bring my children with me and that cost adds up

However, even among some of the people who agreed with the statement there was some hesitancy:

Bus delays and fares sometimes make me late, free transport would remove one barrier	I think that is a plus for people as it is free but doesn't have to do nothing with attending or not	[Public transportation] needs to be frequent too...
Because you have to pre-plan in case there a hiccup on the mode of transport	It's attending the courses, not the Jobcentre, that's the issue	Sometimes bus is delayed

On the other hand, people who either said neither, or disagreed with the statement mentioned things like:

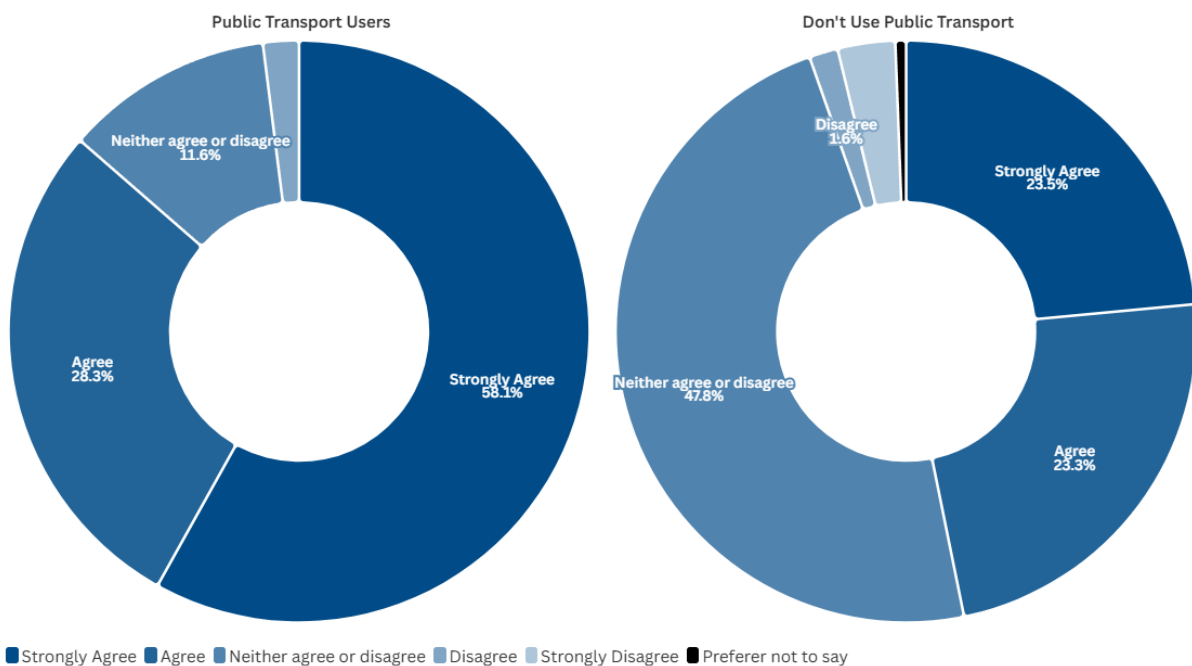
I am okay walking	Don't use public transport either due to physical or mental health issues	Own a private vehicle
I already receive reduced fare cost	I have phone appointments	I use a bicycle and buses will be late anyway and still get sanctioned

The responses of those that use public transport and those who don't might differ significantly. To investigate this, the same data is broken down into those that use public transportation to get to the job centre and those that don't.

Graph 11: Opinion of free public transportation by public transport use, weighted percentage

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Access to free public transport would reduce the chance of me getting sanctioned for not attending a work coach appointment."

Broken down by public transportation use and whether the person has been sanctioned or missed an appointment before



For the above graph, if a person uses multiple modes of transportation to get to the Jobcentre, they are categorised as "Public Transport User" if public transportation is one of their modes of transport.

As expected, individuals who use public transport are more in favour of free public transport than those who do not. However, a substantial proportion of non-users also agree with this statement, which may seem counterintuitive given their lack of reliance on public transport. One possible explanation is that some individuals use alternative transport due to cost, and may switch to public transport if it were free. This is supported by travel patterns in this group, where 37.7% (46 respondents) reported walking and 21.3% (26 respondents) used a private vehicle. Although 122 respondents fall into this category, only one qualitative response suggests a preference for switching to public transport, stating that "walking can

drag you down,” which adds to the earlier discussion that the cost and availability of public transportation is pushing people to other modes of transportation, even when they would prefer to use public transportation.

Taken together, the initial results show that fear of sanctions is widespread among Universal Credit claimants and that public transport - through its cost, reliability and accessibility - can play a significant role in missed appointments. Within this wider context, the section on ‘Opinions of Free Public Transport’ highlights that while many claimants believe free travel could help reduce their risk of being sanctioned, there are concerns that there are other barriers such as service inflexibility, personal crises and appointment design. This suggests that transport costs, while important, are only one part of a more complex set of challenges shaping claimants’ experiences.

To explore this complexity in greater depth, the following ‘Interview Results’ section draws on lived experiences from claimants across the North East, illustrating how public transport issues interact with rigid systems, sudden life events and limited flexibility, which in turn, drives sanctions in practice.

Interview Results

Causes of Sanctions

Sudden and unavoidable issues and inflexibility of service

Graph 4 shows that 31% of people miss their appointment due to personal circumstances. The interviews provide an important nuance to this figure, that most “personal circumstances” happen very close to the time of the appointment and aren’t avoidable. For example, a mother with an autistic child was called to come and collect her child because he was having a “severe meltdown” just after she left for her work coach appointment. On her way to the school, she called the Jobcentre receptionist and explained her situation. However, she was told that nothing can be done about a missed appointment and it would result in a sanction. Later she did mention that she would prefer phone or online appointments because they are easier to attend.

Being able to attend an appointment from home would remove most of the barriers, [like] of me having to travel with my disabled child. [...] And sometimes unexpected things happen. It's like the law of life. You could make your plans today and then something random happens that causes a whole change of your plans. So, I think that... I need flexibility to be able to reschedule when something like this happens without the fear of being punished.

(From Interview 4)

Another example of the inflexible appointment system leading to sanctions is the experience of Interviewee 3, John*.

John* struggles with suicidal thoughts and has to go to a regular mental health team meeting for check-ups and to collect his medications. When his work coach appointment and mental health meeting clashed, he asked to reschedule the work coach appointment. He was told that his evidence for rescheduling wasn't enough. This put John in a situation where he had to choose between not getting the mental health help he needs or not getting

He tried to appeal the sanction, but this process took over 2 months. He had to reduce his essential spending like food and heating to get by. He wasn't

able to see his daughter that he has joint custody over because he didn't have enough money to feed her.

Although, he eventually won the appeal, two months with little financial help had longer term consequences for John. He had to borrow money through hardship allowances and from friends and family that he is still trying to pay back and he says his anxiety has gotten worse.

(*) A pseudonym is used to protect the anonymity of the interviewee

These cases highlight the limitations of the rigid adherence to in-person appointments. Either tailoring appointments, allowing more flexibility or quickly transitioning to remote appointments could reduce the number of people receiving sanctions.

Unreliability of public transportation

The reliability of public transportation was a frequent point of discussion in the interviews. People mentioned that their bus was delayed, arrived late, broke down mid-route or never showed up as problems that they experience. Many of the respondents also said that a reason for why they would prefer a remote appointment type is to prevent potential problems with public transport:

Definitely. I would prefer that, public transportation is not reliable. The other time the bus did a detour and I was almost late, but I was just lucky that I left early, you know. But it's like it's not reliable at all. Sometimes the bus shows up late and you have to be 30 minutes early to the bus station. Calculating well how long it's going to take you to get there or it's like. It's not reliable at all, so if there is that option of a virtual meeting, it would be very much helpful.

(From Interview 7)

The interviews indicate that individuals are aware of the unreliability of public transport and actively try to find workarounds. For example, one respondent reported taking an earlier bus, while another chose to cycle instead. However, when sanctions occur, it often appears that these workarounds have also failed. For example, Interviewee 19 usually cycles to their Jobcentre appointments, but

their bike chain snapped on the day of the appointment. Although they still had time to catch a bus that would take them to the Jobcentre on time, the bus was significantly delayed. Ultimately, they missed their appointment and got sanctioned for 4 weeks.

Cost of public transportation

The cost of public transport was another problem that interviewees had with public transportation. Some mentioned how going to the Jobcentre and coming back 3 - 4 times a month adds up in their budgeting. Some mentioned that due to lack of childcare sometimes they have to take their children with them, which adds up another bus fare. A few people specifically mentioned that the cost of public transport is a reason why they would prefer remote appointments or at least receive some travel support.

[...] It is quite a lot of money now. I think it's like £3 or something just to get from Norton or £3.60 even just to get from Norton to Stockton. And then obviously you've got to get back as well. And a lot of people don't have that left, because you go to these meetings sometimes, like 3 - 4 times a month. I mean, it adds up. And then on top of that you don't get much on Universal Credit as it is and you've got all the stuff [bills]. So yeah, I think it is a massive cost here, a massive issue with it.

(From Interview 3)

I would say the reason I prefer my bike to public transport is because, mainly, the cost of riding my bike. It is basically free and when you're on Universal Credit, every pound matters. Bus fares add up quickly, especially if you are travelling regularly for work or appointments. I also prefer the reality of cycling with my bike. I can usually control my timing better. I don't have to wait for a bus that might be late or cancelled. Even though bikes do break, most of the time it feels more predictable than public transport.

(From Interview 19)

Lack of knowledge of the system

Some people with childcare responsibilities mentioned they would prefer remote appointment options but were unaware that they could request one. Furthermore, there were a few people that didn't know that they could contact their work coach or message them through their online journals to notify them that they were running late. These point to a lack of knowledge of the UC claimant system. So, a possible way to reduce sanction rates could be to inform people that they can request remote appointment types and how to get in contact with their work coach if they are running late or unable to make an appointment.

Job search evidence issues

Although this wasn't the focus of the interviews, it seems that at least 2 people were also sanctioned because of their proof of work searching wasn't accepted by their work coaches. For example, Interviewee 15 had applied to many jobs, but some employers didn't send back an acknowledgment email. Therefore, it looked like he didn't meet his weekly required number of applications. His work coach later told him that if this is the case that he should apply to more employers until he gets enough acknowledgment emails. He felt very frustrated about this:

To make sure that at least I got enough replies to meet my target on that week. But, that seems somehow over the bar and sometimes unrealistic because... You know, I am applying for up to 100 or 150 jobs in a week by sending my CVs, answering questions over and over. That's huge and then getting back maybe about 50 or 70 acknowledgement emails from those firms. It kind of shows that at least something was done and the rest that didn't respond should not be my fault. [...] But I was told that I didn't do enough, and he maybe thought I was... showing laissez-faire attitude.

(From Interview 15)

Impact of Sanctions

The impact on physical and mental health

The majority of those interviewed expressed that the sanctions (and for some, their experiences with the Jobcentre and work coach) had an impact on their mental health. Common effects included:

- Increased anxiety and stress
- Fear of repeat sanctions
- Feeling punished rather than supported
- Low motivation, hopelessness
- Worsening mental health conditions
- Stigma and humiliation, especially for parents struggling to provide for their children

A dominant theme throughout the interviews is the profound emotional and psychological burden created by sanctions. Respondents frequently described experiences of stress, anxiety, and overwhelming worry, often intensifying during prolonged periods of reduced income.

Parents and carers appeared especially vulnerable, as sanctions generated acute emotional turmoil when they were unable to adequately provide for their children. Several participants described skipping meals so that their children could eat or facing distressing decisions between buying food and paying for transport to mandatory appointments, with the emotional weight of these choices contributing to feelings of guilt and failure as caregivers. For one parent of a six-year-old child with autism and sensory processing difficulties, the threat of sanctions was experienced as deeply overbearing - they explained that *“with the threat of sanctions, I felt trapped”* and that they *“felt punished for being a parent and carer”* (From Interview 4). This sense of entrapment was compounded by the ongoing mental burden of attempting to meet essential costs such as food, heating, electricity, and rent while managing complex caring responsibilities.

This emotional impact is closely linked to the reasons why individuals are sanctioned in the first place. Many of the interviewees stated they were

sanctioned because they were late to the work coach appointment or missed it altogether. As seen in Graph 5, 31.4% missed an appointment with their work coach due to personal circumstances, such as illness or bereavement. Already in a vulnerable position due to their individual situation, being sanctioned added to their stress and anxiety, further impacting their mental health.

It also manifested in tangible impacts on physical health too. Some interviewees reported new or worsened medical conditions that arose because of stress or financial hardship:

[...] mentally everything was just dawning on me and I was feeling like I lost everything. I didn't know what to feel like, so I just broke down in health and I had to be hospitalised for a few days.

(From Interview 15)

Whilst an extreme case, this highlights the interconnectivity of both mental and physical health, and how financial shocks (in this case, the client had their Universal Credit stopped due to their employer not sending evidence) have wider reaching implications. These findings are not new - Wright, Johnsen and Scullion (2018)⁹ and the Public Law Project (2025)¹⁰ have also reported other examples of sanctions causing both mental and physical health impacts.

Beyond individual health impacts, sanctions were also shown to have significant social consequences. The financial impact of their Universal Credit sanction also impacted their relationships with friends, family, and landlords – many stated they borrowed money from family and friends, and/or had to talk to their landlord about their financial situation. The reliance on informal support networks was described as both necessary and humiliating:

Yeah, I hated having to ask for help because I was always trying to be independent... it made me feel embarrassing and also guilty

(From Interview 6)

⁹ Wright, Johnsen and Scullion (2018) [Why benefit sanctions are both ineffective and harmful](#)

¹⁰ Public Law Project (2025) [Sanctionable Failures: Universal Credit's failing sanctions regime and the harm it causes](#)

With friendships and support systems being critical in looking after their mental health ¹¹, the sanctions impact on their relationships with others had, for some, a negative effect on their mental health too – underscoring how sanctions strained relationships and produced feelings of shame.

Finally, interviewees implied there is a psychological weight of managing sanctions, financial instability, and the administrative demands of UC. Several interviewees described becoming hyper-vigilant – double-checking appointment times, leaving excessively early, or repeatedly reviewing their online journal – to avoid triggering another sanction. This constant self monitoring created mental fatigue, reducing participants' capacity to focus on job searching, caring responsibilities, or personal wellbeing. The emotional load of trying to get everything right in a demanding system contributed to further stress, undermining confidence and a sense of personal agency.

The impact on job searching

Universal Credit is designed to provide financial support for people while they seek work and are on a low income, thus supporting unemployed people to find work. Sanctions are supposed to be a corrective tool for claimants who are not putting as much effort into job searching but still claim the financial aid. Therefore, people who are sanctioned should be spending more time and effort on job searching.

In practice, though, most of the people we interviewed found that sanctions made job searching harder. Stress reduced their ability to focus, restricted finances limited their ability to travel to interviews, and the time required to challenge sanction decisions diverted energy away from looking for work. For a small number, sanctions did prompt additional job-seeking, but often towards short-term or insecure roles simply to cover basic essentials, as reflected in one interviewee's comment:

I also looked for a short term or a [cash in hand] work just to get a bit of money for essentials

¹¹ Mental Health Foundation (2021) [Friendship and mental health](#)

(From Interview 5)

These experiences mirror findings from previous research¹², which similarly highlight the counterproductive effects of sanctioning^{13 14 15}.

Overall, the stress, financial instability, and administrative burden created by sanctions undermined participants' ability to search for work or sustain employment, heightened fears of repeat sanctions, and contributed to cycles in which each sanction increased the likelihood of another:

I felt anxious because I worry too much and I worried about how I would make it through the month and fearful of missing another appointment.

(From Interview 4)

Many interviewees mentioned that, as well as cutting back on essential bills such as energy bills, food costs and other bills, many had to cut back on expenses that could enable them to secure work in the future such as money to travel to job interviews as well as phone bills and internet costs. Sanctions, in this respect, appear to be counterproductive.

I wasn't able to pay my Internet bill, which means I wasn't able to use a laptop. I wasn't able to pay my phone bill, which means I wasn't able to use my phone or the Internet.

(From Interview 3)

Rather than supporting people into stable employment, sanctions often acted as a barrier to progress. Taken together, these experiences illustrate that material deprivation is not simply a financial issue; it is intertwined with psychological wellbeing, generating chronic stress, uncertainty and emotional exhaustion.

The impact on food insecurity

¹² Public Law Project (2025) [Sanctionable Failures: Universal Credit's failing sanctions regime and the harm it causes](#)

¹³ Mind (2016) [BNS0014 - Evidence on Benefit sanctions](#)

¹⁴ Money and Mental Health Policy (2022) [Benefit sanctions, work and mental health](#)

¹⁵ House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2018) [Benefit Sanctions](#)

Many interviewees, without needing to be prompted, mentioned the impact that the sanction had on their ability to afford their essential bills, especially their ability to afford adequate food for themselves and their families. For example, Interviewee 4, who cares for their 6 year-old child with autism and sensory processing difficulties mentioned the difficulties she had faced in accessing food for her and her child.

I had to rely on a local food bank for like a few weeks. It wasn't really enough to cover groceries. I had to carefully ration electricity and gas payments. [...] It's not really easy to care for a child with disability. I was really, really worried. I had to lean heavily on my family and friends and as a single mother.

I had to reduce the quality and quantity of what I bought and how I eat. My child has sensory issues around foods and needs familiar specific items. [...] I was in a survival mode, and it was really, really hard.

(From Interview 4)

I was also forced to, you know, adjust family meals with my kids. I just try to make do with a little less food and sometimes I would miss meals so that my kids would have something to eat.

(From Interview 8)

A key theme that ran throughout all the interviews conducted was that sanctions forced Interviewees to not just cut back on their essentials, but that these decisions also had wider impact on individuals' mental and physical health, their household stability and family dynamics. For example, Interviewee 3 who has joint responsibility of his two-year-old child mentioned that the sanction reduced his ability to provide for his daughter and, in turn, reduced the amount of time he could spend with his daughter during the sanction:

I wasn't able to get enough food in to sustain me and her [2 year old daughter] for the period of time that I have her. I wasn't able to really put enough money on the heat and to keep it warm enough over that time. So... I've missed out on six or seven days for the month, maybe eight... seeing my daughter because of the sanction, and it runs over into this month's money too.

(From Interview 3)

Wider repercussions of sanctions

Moreover, sanctions over a longer period of time can lead to deep, engrained household instability and precarity. This is especially the case for housing costs and people falling behind on their rent payments as a result of the sanction. It was noted that a good relationship with an Interviewee's landlord prevented them from eviction proceedings.

I fell behind on my rent and my landlord sent me a warning letter about it... I had to speak with the landlord and explain the situation and then, thankfully, they gave me a bit of time to catch up once the Universal Credit payments, you know, are normal again... It was really a stressful period for me.

(From Interview 5)

There were definitely knock-on effects during the long sanction. I fell behind on my rent by a couple of weeks. My landlord wasn't happy about it and sent me a warning letter saying that if I miss another payment that will have started eviction proceedings. They really scared me because I didn't have anywhere else to go.

(From Interview 6)

However, not all our Interviewees were able to come to an agreement with their landlord. Interviewee 2 mentioned that his lack of income over several months led to his eviction.

I lost me house because of it, everything. I lost everything. I didn't have a home. I was on the streets. I am still on the streets because I haven't got a house. And now it is really difficult to get a house. I've come to [Citizens Advice] and they gave us food and stuff. They started me money again, but I still haven't got a home because it takes so long to get a home.

(From Interview 2)

As outlined above, the Interviewees shared that they went to extreme lengths to be able to cope with the emotional and financial toll of being sanctioned. From borrowing from friends and family; cutting back on essential bills; seeking short term work; to accessing charitable support including food banks, faith support, hardship grants and advice. The clear message though was that this experience

was painful and often had long term implications for their household's financial stability, despite sanctions lasting for a few weeks in many cases. This is because many interviewed do not have the financial safety net of savings to be able to shoulder the burden of a cut to their income, even if temporary and so had to borrow money to get by or fall into debt.

Besides borrowing and using the food bank, I also cut back on almost everything. I stopped using public transportation unless absolutely necessary and tried to work elsewhere. I limited my heating, electricity use to save the bills, and I also looked for a short term or cash in hand work just to get a bit of money for essentials. I also reached out to a local charity that helped me, you know, in a small hardship payment, which really made a difference at that time.

(From Interview 5)

What is more is that many mentioned how it made them feel to be in this situation and using these coping mechanisms, including impacting their confidence and feeling guilty for relying on friends and family for support.

My family helped me out, but I could tell they were getting worried, not just about the money, but about how stressful it was. I hated having to ask for help because I was always trying to be independent. It made me feel embarrassed and also guilty.

(From Interview 6)

What is clear from these conversations is that there are no safeguarding checks in place to ensure that those sanctioned, as well as their families, can afford the essentials. The process and the robustness of safeguards around the imposition and subsequent appeal of sanctions must be strengthened. In their current form, sanctions are embedding harm into the social security system by failing to ensure that those sanctioned are safeguarded to be able to afford their essentials, including food, energy and housing costs. This is particularly important for those with vulnerabilities, including families with children and those with health conditions and disabilities.

Moreover, many of the costs that are cut back on result in claimants being less likely to secure good work in the future, which puts into question the Department for Work and Pensions heavy reliance on sanctions as a tool to move people towards work, rather than using sanctions as a last resort.

Discussion

Public transport

Public transport emerges throughout this research not as a standalone cause of sanctions, but as a symptom of a rigid, in-person-centred appointment system that compels claimants to use often unreliable transport networks, thereby exposing them to avoidable risks of sanctioning.

Evidence from both the survey data and the interviews suggests that many of the difficulties experienced by claimants mostly stemmed from the Jobcentre appointment system. Claimants frequently reported being unable to reschedule appointments when confronted with sudden and unavoidable changes in personal circumstances, a symptom of inflexibility. In other cases, missed appointments were due to disruptions or delays in public transport. However, the same claimants said they would prefer remote appointments because they know they can't rely on the public transport in their area.

Furthermore, the evidence reveals that claimants who miss appointments are rarely disengaged from the welfare system. On the contrary, many described extensive efforts to ensure attendance, including leaving home early, walking long distances or cycling. These strategies demonstrate that claimants frequently anticipate potential disruptions and actively develop contingency plans to comply with appointment requirements. Sanctions therefore tend to occur not because individuals make no effort to attend, but because both their primary and back-up strategies fail simultaneously, often due to circumstances beyond their control. In this context, missed appointments are better understood as the consequence of compounded structural vulnerabilities rather than individual irresponsibility or disengagement.

From this perspective, **improvements to public transport infrastructure may marginally reduce sanction rates, but they would not address the broader structural limitations of the current appointment system**, particularly its inability to accommodate for unexpected personal circumstances. By contrast, expanding the availability of remote appointments could remove transport-related barriers entirely for many claimants.

Although this research does not include a formal cost-benefit analysis, the findings suggest that reforming Jobcentre appointment practices may represent a more effective and efficient strategy for reducing sanctions than investing in transport improvements alone.

Work readiness

Sanctions are designed to motivate claimants to job search more if they are deemed not to be doing enough or have breached their claimant commitment requirements. However, the evidence from this research challenges this notion.

Firstly, 90% of sanctions decisions are due to “Failure to Attend or Participate in a Mandatory Interview” not for lack of job searching as seen in Table 2. Therefore, the current use of sanctions is to punish claimants for not attending their appointments. This is problematic as discussed in previous sections as there are genuine barriers for people attending their appointments.

Secondly, as mentioned in “The impact on job searching” section above, most of the people we interviewed found that sanctions made job searching harder. Reduced income meant that they had to spend more time trying to meet their essential spending like food, rent, and heating. Challenging sanctions decisions diverted energy away from looking for work. For a small number, sanctions did prompt additional job seeking, but often towards short term or insecure roles simply to cover essentials.

This is not the first time the efficiency of sanctions has been challenged. The National Audit Office found that while Job Seekers Allowance claimants spent less time claiming benefits after getting a sanction, they were just as likely to stop claiming without finding work, as they were to find work¹⁶. Furthermore, the Welfare Conditionality Project found that Jobcentre’s focus on claimants fulfilling their mandatory conditions, plus claimants’ fear of sanctions, led to “counterproductive compliance,” leading claimants to apply for jobs that they

¹⁶ National Audit Office (2026) [Benefit Sanctions](#)

realistically didn't have a chance of attaining¹⁷. The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee investigated benefit sanctions in 2018. In their report they claim that:

“At best, evidence on the effectiveness of sanctions is mixed, and at worst, it shows them to be counterproductive. The Coalition Government had little or no understanding of the likely impact of a tougher sanctions regime when it was introduced in 2012. It said the policy would be reviewed on an ongoing basis to understand its impact and the extent to which it was achieving its objectives. But six years later, it is none the wiser. The lack of any such evaluation is unacceptable.”

([Benefit Sanctions](#), p.19)

Communication gaps as a driver of sanctions and harm

A clear and consistent theme across the interviews is the central role of **communication failures** in driving avoidable sanctions. Many participants made genuine efforts to notify Jobcentres about delays, illness, childcare emergencies, or transport problems, yet were sanctioned regardless. Others were unaware that they could request remote appointments or message their work coach through their online journal.

These gaps reveal structural shortcomings rather than individual failings. When claimants are unclear about their options, cannot get through to the Jobcentre, or communicate but are still penalised, the system effectively converts communication barriers into financial punishment. This is especially harmful for claimants facing language barriers, digital exclusion, anxiety, or caring responsibilities, for whom communication itself may already be challenging.

The findings suggest that **how communication is handled is as important as whether it occurs**. Where claimants act in good faith, but flexibility is unavailable, sanctions function as automatic penalties rather than proportionate responses.

¹⁷ Welfare Conditionality Project (2018) [Final Findings Report 2013-1018](#)

Immediate crisis and survival responses

This research demonstrates that sanctions have consequences that extend far beyond the immediate loss of Universal Credit payments. For many claimants, sanctions trigger **short-term crises** that rapidly develop into **long-term instability**, particularly where individuals already live on extremely low incomes and have no financial buffer. While sanctions are often framed as temporary or corrective measures, the lived experiences captured in this study show that their impacts are frequently **enduring, cumulative and difficult to reverse**.

In the short term, sanctions routinely result in claimants being unable to meet essential costs, including food, energy, rent and transport. Interviewees repeatedly described being forced into crisis responses such as skipping meals, relying on food banks, borrowing from friends and family, and cutting off internet or phone access. These responses were not isolated incidents but common coping mechanisms, indicating that even brief sanctions can push households into acute hardship.

However, the evidence also shows that these impacts are often not limited to the formal “fixed” sanction period. Many sanctions for missed appointments include an **indefinite element**, which continues until the claimant re-engages. In practice, this means that what is intended to be a short-term penalty can become prolonged and unpredictable, particularly where there are delays in communication, rearranging appointments, or accessing work coaches.

Crucially, claimants are not always aware that their sanction will continue until they take further action. Where communication is unclear, or where individuals are unable to make timely contact - such as when helplines are busy or urgent issues arise on the day - this can unintentionally extend the period without income. As a result, **what begins as a short-term financial shock can quickly escalate into a longer crisis**, intensifying the need for emergency coping strategies.

Crucially, these immediate impacts often **undermine claimants’ ability to comply with future requirements**. Loss of income restricts access to phone

credit, internet, and public transport — all of which are essential for attending appointments, communicating with work coaches and searching for work. In this way, sanctions can actively increase the likelihood of further sanctions, embedding people in a cycle of non-compliance driven by deprivation rather than behaviour.

Debt, housing instability and prolonged recovery

The longer-term impacts of sanctions are best understood as an extension of these initial crises, compounded by the fact that sanction duration itself is often uncertain and, in practice, longer than expected.

Although many sanctions are presented as lasting only a matter of weeks, the research demonstrates that both **the actual duration and the recovery period are often significantly longer**. The inclusion of an indefinite element in low-level sanctions means that their total length can extend well beyond the fixed period, particularly where reengagement is delayed or where claimants are unaware of the steps required to end the sanction. In some cases, this results in low-level sanctions lasting longer than more serious sanctions, challenging assumptions about proportionality.

Even where payments are eventually restored, the recovery period commonly lasts **months or longer**. Claimants described accumulating debt during sanction periods that continued well after payments resumed. Rent arrears, hardship allowance repayments, utility debt and informal borrowing placed ongoing pressure on already fragile household finances, limiting people's ability to stabilise their situation once the sanction ended.

The evidence suggests that **longer or extended sanctions amplify these effects significantly**. Where sanctions last beyond the anticipated timeframe - whether due to delays in re-engagement, retrospective decision making or communication failures - the resulting financial pressure becomes more severe, increasing the risk of deep or entrenched hardship.

For some, sanctions had irreversible consequences. Several interviewees mentioned worsened mental or physical health, and one was made homeless. These long-term outcomes highlight that sanctions should not be assessed solely by their formal duration, but by the **length, uncertainty, and severity of harm they generate**.

These findings reinforce that sanctions are not experienced as clearly defined, time limited interventions. Instead, their **open-ended nature and interaction with communication and system delays** can extend both the period of financial loss and the pathway to recovery, with lasting consequences for stability, wellbeing and capacity to move towards work.

Sanctions as destabilising rather than corrective

The evidence shows that sanctions frequently **destabilise claimants' lives rather than supporting progress towards** work. Short-term income loss produces immediate crisis, while longer-term debt, health issues and housing insecurity undermine stability, confidence and capacity to engage with job seeking activities. Communication failures and rigid appointment systems convert everyday disruptions into punishments, while transport barriers amplify inequalities in who bears the greatest risk.

Rather than functioning as a last resort compliance tool, sanctions often operate as a mechanism that **deepens vulnerability and prolongs recovery**. The findings strongly suggest that reducing sanctions - particularly those linked to appointment attendance - requires not only addressing transport costs and reliability, but redesigning systems around flexibility, communication and reasonableness. Without this, sanctions will continue to generate harm that extends far beyond their intended scope or duration.

Recommendations

Personalised appointment systems

The findings indicate that the default reliance on mandatory in-person appointments exposes claimants to sanction risk through factors that are often beyond their control, including unreliable public transport, caring responsibilities, health conditions and illness. In light of this, this research recommends that the Department for Work and Pensions adopt a more flexible and claimant-centred approach to appointment scheduling, rather than treating in-person attendance as the default requirement.

Many work coach appointments last only around ten minutes, yet claimants are frequently required to interrupt other responsibilities or pay for weekly bus fares despite being on very low incomes. The evidence suggests that this system places disproportionate burdens on claimants relative to the limited duration of many appointments. As a result, appointment formats should be tailored to individual circumstances. This can be achieved by work coaches having a conversation with their claimant at the beginning of, and at regular intervals during, a claim focusing on claimants' needs, preferences, vulnerabilities and potential barriers. In particular, claimants with caring responsibilities, those living significant distances from Jobcentres without access to private transport and those with physical or mental health conditions should be able to request remote appointments where appropriate.

This recommendation does not imply that in-person appointments should be eliminated entirely. The survey findings demonstrate that claimants have differing preferences and needs, and some may continue to prefer face-to-face interactions. However, in-person attendance should be justified by a specific and clearly articulated purpose, rather than functioning as the automatic default. Allowing greater use of remote appointments would reduce the risk of sanctions arising from circumstances outside a claimants' control.

Expand what constitutes a “Good Reason” for missing an appointment

According to Universal Credit Guidance Documents, DWP does accept certain reasons for not attending a work-focused interview as “good reasons” to not sanction the claimant. We would recommend additions to the list of good reasons that encapsulate the following reasons.

- Attending a sudden and unforeseen caring responsibility (towards a child or an adult) at the time of the appointment.
- Arriving late due to issues with public transportation

Sudden caring responsibilities are often unpredictable and unavoidable, particularly for low-income households with limited access to alternative care arrangements. Sanctioning claimants in such circumstances risks penalising individuals, not for disengagement from the welfare system, but for responding to immediate care obligations. This is evident in the case of Interviewee 4, a mother who had to miss their work-focused interview because her 6-year-old child with autism was having a “severe mental breakdown”.

Although current Universal Credit guidance already recognises some childcare-related disruptions as constituting a “good reason”, its scope is too narrowly defined: “The claimant was temporarily looking after a child full time, because the normal care is: ill, temporarily ill, temporarily absent from home, looking after a family member who is ill”¹⁸. This reason excludes adult care responsibilities and ignores sudden changes in people’s circumstances. The proposed addition would improve procedural fairness by ensuring that sanctions are not applied in cases where claimants are temporarily unable to attend appointments due to circumstances outside of their control.

We would also recommend arriving late due to public transport issues to be considered a good reason. The idea is if a claimant misses their appointment but arrives at the job centre within a reasonable time and informs their work coach, they should not be sanctioned. This doesn’t mean that the work coach and the claimant should have their appointment at the time the claimant arrives. But the

¹⁸ Rights Net (2026) Universal Credit Guidance – [Fail to attend: Good reason guide](#):Goodreasonguide

claimant should keep their UC standard allowance until their next meeting. This approach is fair, as interviews suggest claimants make genuine efforts to attend on time, and transport disruptions are beyond their control. However, repeated lateness may be treated as an exception to this rule.

These two expansions to the good reasons list are also in line with the recommendation of the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee's 2018 investigation into Benefit Sanctions.

Increased awareness and expansion of existing travel support

Interview findings indicate that many claimants were unaware of existing transport support schemes or did not understand that they may have been eligible to access them. In several cases, participants described struggling with transport costs while attending mandatory appointments despite support mechanisms already being available.

In response, this research recommends that the Department for Work and Pensions, alongside local Citizens Advice offices and partners, improve awareness of schemes such as the Jobcentre Plus Travel Discount Card, Half-Price Tickets for Jobseekers by Stagecoach and the Flexible Support Fund. Improving communication about these schemes through clearer guidance from work coaches, information provided at the beginning of a claim and signposting through local Citizens Advice services and advice organisations may help reduce transport-related non-attendance and avoid unnecessary sanctions in the short term.

Reintroduce a regional Universal Credit sanctions forum to strengthen feedback, escalation and learning

To support the delivery of the recommendations above, particularly those relating to **sanctions being used only as a last resort; improved communication and addressing transport related structural barriers**, we recommend the re-introduction of a **regional forum bringing together regional colleagues from the DWP, local Citizens Advice offices and other relevant local stakeholders**

(such as Combined Authorities, transport bodies, or support providers where appropriate).

As highlighted earlier in this report, sanctions often lead to long-term harm that extends well beyond the sanction period itself, including prolonged debt, housing instability, and in some cases, homelessness. Advisers frequently identify these risks early yet currently lack a formal route to escalate systemic issues before harm occurs. A regional forum would provide a structured feedback loop enabling frontline insight to inform operational practice and service design at an earlier stage. Specifically, the forum could:

- support the early identification of avoidable sanctions, reinforcing the principle that sanctions should be applied only after all reasonable alternatives have been exhausted.
- escalate recurring issues linked to communication breakdowns, such as claimants not being aware of appointment options or experiencing difficulty contacting Jobcentres.
- surface evidence on public transport failures and costs as structural drivers of missed appointments, supporting joined up solutions rather than individual penalties.
- improve consistency in how reasonableness and discretion are applied across Jobcentres.
- contribute to the design, monitoring and evaluation of regional pilots and service changes, drawing directly on claimant experience.

This recommendation directly supports earlier calls to move away from rigid default practices, improve flexibility when disruption is reported and prevent short-term sanctions from escalating into long-term hardship. By enabling continuous dialogue between operational decisionmakers and advice services, a regional forum would help ensure that policy intent, frontline practice, and claimant experience are better aligned.

Local Citizens Advice services are well placed to act as a collaborator and critical friend, offering constructive challenge alongside practical solutions. Reintroducing a regional forum would formalise this relationship, embed learning and strengthen prevention – ensuring that issues are addressed **before** sanctions

are imposed, rather than after significant harm has already occurred, as this quote eloquently states:

I just want it to be clear that a lot of us don't miss appointments because we don't care... we miss them because we are dealing with a lot of situations that are really unpredictable and very, very urgent.

We have to prioritise our kids and our child's health before anything, and it's not like we're neglecting our jobs or something. I would say the sanction that I experienced didn't motivate me at all. All it did was destabilise me and made it immediately harder for me to cope and harder to plan my day-to-day life. So instead of feeling supported, I felt punished for being a parent and a carer.

(From Interview 4)

Case Study #1

Helen* worked as a self-employed hairdresser for many years, operating independently and claiming Universal Credit. At the end of 2023, she stopped working due to ongoing back problems and was on sick leave for a few months. During this time, she claimed Universal Credit without an issue, until one day she was informed by UC that she had to inform HMRC that she stopped being self-employed and that her payments are paused until then. This confused her as she was planning to return to work and restart her self-employment that week, now that she was no longer signed off sick.

In an attempt to resolve the issue, Helen contacted HMRC but was told that they could not locate her account and that she would need to create a new one. However, she was unable to do this because she did not have the required identification documents, such as a passport or driving licence. At the same time, because her Universal Credit payments had stopped and she had not yet returned to work, she had no income and could not afford to obtain identification documents. As her financial situation worsened, Helen fell behind on her rent and was eventually evicted from her home. She spent the next six months homeless and rough sleeping before she was finally able to secure the identification needed to resolve the issue.

During this period, Helen relied heavily on food banks, Citizens Advice, and support from local churches in order to survive. Although her Universal Credit payments were eventually reinstated and backdated, Helen described the outcome as "too late", as the damage to her circumstances and wellbeing had already been done. By that point, she had experienced homelessness, was searching for new accommodation, and she says that her physical and mental health had significantly deteriorated. She explained that her back pain had worsened considerably as a result of months spent rough sleeping and that her mental health had declined to the extent that she developed chronic anxiety and was prescribed anti-depressants.

(*) Names have been changed to protect anonymity

Case Study #2

Lydia* has been claiming Universal Credit for the past three years after leaving her job in a community support role to care full-time for her six-year-old son, who has autism and sensory processing difficulties. She explains that leaving work and claiming Universal Credit was not a choice but a necessity due to the increasing demands of managing her son's care and wellbeing. During her time on Universal Credit, Lydia says she consistently complied with the system's requirements by attending appointments, updating her online journal and engaging with work-related expectations despite the challenges of being a full-time carer.

The first, and so far, the only, sanction that affected Lydia arose after she received a call from her son's school informing her that he was experiencing a severe meltdown shortly after drop-off. Although she had planned her morning carefully to attend a mandatory Jobcentre appointment after taking her son to school, she said that there was no realistic way to both take care of her son and arrive at the appointment on time. Lydia contacted the Jobcentre to explain the situation and requested either a rescheduled or telephone appointment but says she was informed that a missed appointment couldn't be resolved and she would be sanctioned. She later submitted further details through her Universal Credit journal, but the decision remained unchanged. Lydia felt frustrated that despite trying to communicate and act responsibly, she was treated as though she was being negligent.

The four-week sanction reduced Lydia's standard allowance and created significant financial hardship. She struggled to pay for essentials such as food, energy, travel and rent, eventually relying on food banks and borrowing money from family and friends despite initially wanting to avoid doing so.

Lydia says the experience had a serious impact on her mental health, causing stress and anxiety that also affected her ability to care for her son, including meeting his specific nutritional needs. She further believes the sanction harmed her ability to job search, as much of her time and mental energy became focused on managing crises and basic survival.

(*) Names have been changed to protect anonymity

Case Study #3

Marcus* has been claiming Universal Credit on and off for the past three years while moving in and out of employment. After losing his job as a sales associate, he attempted to find another full-time role but found that many of the jobs available to him were zero-hour contracts that did not provide enough stability or income to meet his basic needs. This led him to apply for Universal Credit for the first time. Marcus typically travelled to the Jobcentre by bicycle, leaving early to avoid problems with unreliable public transport and to reduce travel costs.

On the day of his mandatory appointment his bicycle chain jammed, he initially tried to fix it, but when he realised that he had lost too much time trying to repair the bike, he decided to take the next bus which could still take him to the Jobcentre on time. However, the bus was significantly delayed and, once onboard, he realised traffic would prevent him from reaching the Jobcentre before the appointment time. During the journey he attempted to contact his work coach but could not find their details and later admitted that he did not know he could message them through his online journal. When he eventually arrived late, staff at the front desk informed him that his appointment had already been marked as missed and that he would receive a sanction. He was also told at that point that he could have contacted his work coach through the journal system. Marcus later submitted an explanation through his journal, but the sanction was still applied. He says he was shocked by how quickly the sanction process occurred and by what he perceived as the lack of flexibility.

The four-week sanction had a major impact on Marcus's financial security and wellbeing. He relied on Universal Credit to cover essentials such as food, gas, electricity and travel and once the sanction began, he drastically reduced his spending, cut out all non-essential purchases and sometimes skipped meals.

He used local foodbanks, borrowed money from family and friends, and relied heavily on his bicycle to avoid the cost of bus fares whenever it was functioning properly. Marcus says the experience left him anxious, fearful, and less secure, even after the sanction ended. He became hyper-vigilant about attending appointments and updating his online journal, often leaving much earlier than necessary and repeatedly checking information before submitting it to the online journal. Although he initially felt embarrassed about relying on others, he later said that emotional and financial support from friends and family helped make the situation more bearable. Marcus

also believes the sanction harmed his ability to look for work, as he became focused on day-to-day survival and managing stress rather than job searching.

Reflecting on the experience, he argued that sanctions are too harsh on people who are already struggling and stated that he would strongly prefer phone appointments in future, particularly given the unreliability and cost of local transport compared to the short length of most Jobcentre meetings.

(*) Names have been changed to protect anonymity

**citizens
advice** County
Durham

**citizens
advice** Darlington,
Redcar &
Cleveland

**citizens
advice** Gateshead

**citizens
advice** Hartlepool

**citizens
advice** Middlesbrough

**citizens
advice** Newcastle

**citizens
advice** North
Tyneside

**citizens
advice** Northumberland

**citizens
advice** South
Tyneside

**citizens
advice** Stockton

**citizens
advice** Sunderland