

Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working

Chapter 2: Reforming the structure of the health and disability benefits system

1. What further steps could the Department for Work and Pensions take to make sure the benefit system supports people to try work without the worry that it may affect their benefit entitlement?

Over the last seven years, Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) has funded the Sanctions, Support and Service Leavers research study by the University of Salford, exploring the experiences of ex-Service personnel as they navigate the UK benefits systems. The latest report, [*Navigating the minefield: Veterans' experiences of the benefits system over time*](#), explores how ex-Service personnel navigate conditionality. It found that they are often unclear about the expectations and requirements placed on them. We therefore welcome the introduction of measures to alleviate people's worries around trying work so long as it is appropriate for them to do so.

The research also found that some Work Coaches lacked understanding of the Armed Forces, and the transferrable skills gained while serving. As a result, some Work Coaches expected ex-Service personnel to take jobs that weren't matched to their experience and skills, with some being expected to take low-paid, insecure work that could leave them financially worse off. Poor interactions and pushing ex-Service personnel to try work that they are not suited for created feeling of injustice and mistrust as well as anxiety for some. It is therefore recommended that, in addition to reducing the risk of trying work, there should be greater understanding of the Armed Forces by Work Coaches and wider JCP staff and effective support to help match ex-Service personnel with appropriate employment. More positive and personalised interactions between staff and benefits recipients can help to achieve this.

5. What practical steps could we take to improve our current approach to safeguarding people who use our services?

Some ex-Service personnel who access the benefits system have significant and complex needs. The introduction of Armed Forces Champions, who deliver personalised and advanced support for ex-Service personnel has been effective in providing the crucial support needed to this cohort in helping them to access benefits, employment opportunities and connect with external stakeholders for additional support. However, challenges remain with variations in geographical coverage and delivery of the Armed Forces Champion role as well as demand and short-term funding causing capacity issues and uncertainty for both JCP staff and ex-Service personnel. The DWP should therefore review the Armed Forces Champion network to ensure that consistent support is provided in all JCP districts. The DWP should also review and identify the resources required to meet the need and permanently embed the Champions with sustainable funding.

The complex needs of ex-Service personnel can include trauma, both because of and unrelated to their service in the Armed Forces. For some, this can lead to poor mental health outcomes. As part of Sanctions, Support and Service Leavers project, a [*separate report*](#) was published examining how the benefits system is experienced by those with a background of trauma. The participants experienced both positive and negative experiences.

Some participants felt unsafe during their interactions with the benefits system, experiencing anxiety and intimidation when faced with busy waiting rooms and offices, when security guards were present within offices or where there was limited privacy in their interactions with JCP staff when talking about their medical or service histories. The research found that the presence or absence of safety, trustworthiness, collaboration and choice can underpin the experiences of ex-Service personnel.

However, areas of good practice were also seen and should be built on to ensure that a consistent approach is delivered to vulnerable claimants. These included interactions with Work Coaches who demonstrated empathy, trust, respect and understanding and who used their discretionary powers appropriately to adjust interactions and expectations. Ex-Service personnel appreciated receiving support tailored to their circumstances and where adequate time was devoted to supporting them.

It is therefore recommended that the DWP continue its commitment to trauma-informed care, provide appropriate training and ongoing support for staff in relation to trauma informed approaches and enable staff to manage caseloads in a more personalised way.

Chapter 3: Supporting people to thrive

6. How should the support conversation be designed and delivered so that it is welcomed by individuals and is effective?

We would welcome the introduction of the new support conversation that helps to identify the best next steps for claimants, whether it be further support, training or employment where appropriate.

The Sanctions, Support and Service Leavers study highlighted several positive interactions between ex-Service personnel and their Work Coaches which could be replicated in the new support conversations. Those who reported positive iterations, often described their Work Coach as demonstrating trust that they were the experts in their own chosen career field or were best placed to understand what was possible or realistic within the context of their current health. As previously mentioned, ex-Service personnel also appreciated receiving support tailored to their circumstances and praised staff who used their discretionary powers appropriately to adjust interactions and expectations.

The study also found that there is no one approach best suited to communicating with claimants. Instead, it is important that people can choose the means of interaction that causes them the least stress and allows them the most control. Where written correspondence is used, via email, letters and texts, there is a need to consider how messages may land with claimants. For in-person interactions, it is important that the physical environment does not trigger stress or anxiety and instead promotes a welcoming environment and privacy.

Taking lessons from the DWP support provided during the Covid pandemic, some participants welcomed interactions with DWP staff that included checking on wellbeing and providing reassurance. The return to in-person interaction, whilst positive for some, also came with an introduction of conditionality and pressure which can result in negative experiences and push ex-Service personnel further from the labour market. Support into employment should therefore include appropriate consideration of mental and physical health issues related to the Armed Forces.