

Citizens Advice Scotland

Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux
www.cas.org.uk



Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry into Jobcentre Plus

Response from Citizens Advice Scotland

May 2013

- Citizens Advice Scotland and its member bureaux form Scotland's largest independent advice network. CAB advice services are delivered using service points throughout Scotland, from the islands to city centres.
- Citizens advice bureaux in Scotland helped clients with over 500,000 new issues in 2011/12 – more than 1,400 new issues for every day of the year. Nearly 200,000 clients brought new issues to a bureau over the year.
- In 2011/12, Scottish bureaux achieved a financial gain of almost £140million for clients based on funding of £16.9million.

1. Citizens Advice Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Work and Pensions Select Committee's inquiry into Jobcentre Plus.

Context

2. Benefits advice is the largest area of advice demand for bureaux in Scotland. In 2012/13, citizens advice bureaux in Scotland advised on nearly 319,000 benefits issues. Of these 202,800 were new issues, and 116,000 were repeat issues, where a client comes back with a further issue with the same benefit.
3. Over the five years to 2011/12, the number of benefits issues seen in bureaux has increased by 39%. Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is a significant driver of advice demand, with the number of sickness/disability issues increasing by 55% over the four years since the introduction of ESA. Preliminary statistics for 2012/13 suggest that there has been a similar level of increase in ESA issues over the past year alone, as well as significant increases in issues relating to Jobseekers Allowance (JSA).
4. Other drivers of demand including increasing referrals from Jobcentres to bureaux, the inaccessibility of DWP and HMRC phone lines and the drive towards moving benefit claims online.
5. We are also supporting many more people at appeal. Between 2009/10 and 2011/12 the number of benefit tribunals where bureaux represented clients increased by 118%. We have seen a 78% increase in the number of cases we support but cannot represent in the last five years.

Administration of benefits

6. Many of the clients who come to bureaux with problems with benefits have difficulties negotiating the administration of the benefits system. These administrative problems are leading to substantial difficulties for many clients.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who moved from elsewhere in Scotland to this area on the 7th of the month. She received her last JSA payment on the 2nd. When she arrived in this area she signed on for JSA at the Jobcentre on the 13th, within two weeks of her last payment. However she has heard nothing regarding her claim. She completed a new claim on the 23rd, still with no result. Finally she completed her third JSA application on the 6th of the following month. After this, the client came to the bureau and asked them to contact the Jobcentre regarding this on her behalf. The adviser contacted the Jobcentre office but was informed that there was no record of any claims made by the client for JSA. It was suggested that the applications were lost either in the mail or the system.

A North of Scotland CAB reports that following the client's online application for Jobseekers Allowance he was told that he would be informed within 24 hours of his interview date and time. He has not yet received this information. The client has no money and no food and is diabetic. We phoned the DWP to try to find out how long it might be before the client received his first benefit payment so that a reasonable estimate of need could be made for the Short Term Benefit Advance (STBA).

Phone call 1 (10 mins on hold): Client failed security check.

Phone call 2 (10 mins on hold): Client again failed security check. The client was repeating information which has never previously failed a security test in this adviser's presence. We were advised to phone a third time and that if that call also failed security we would need to request a call back from DWP to the client's home number and that this would take place about 1600 hours, at which point the client would no longer be in the office.

Phone call 3 (10 minute on hold): We were informed that as a CAB we could request an "Implicit Consent" which would bypass this process. Implicit consent was granted. In response to our query concerning the delay in setting up an interview we were directed to the new claims line.

Phone call 4: Called new claims line. Redirected to the "Queries being processed line".

Phone call 5 (10 minutes): They checked their records which showed that the client's application had not been registered yet. We were directed back to the New Claims line.

Phone call 6 (10 minutes): The New Claims line set up an interview for the client. New Claims also informed us that normally the client could not make a claim for a Short Term Benefit Advance until he had signed on at his initial interview. They agreed to try to process an STBA immediately but this meant that the client would be phoned for an interview at 1600 hours on Friday and had no hope of money until next week.

Phone call 7: Telephoned Social Services who agreed to see the client at 1400 hours in their office to see if he might be eligible for a food parcel.

An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has mental health problems and so has a Penumbra Support Worker and a Community Psychiatric Nurse. He has received a letter from the district Benefit Centre (dated five days previously) requesting his telephone number so that they can call him regarding conversion from Incapacity Benefit/Severe Disablement Allowance/Income Support on the grounds of illness or disability to ESA. The letter states the call must be made within seven days. His Support Worker tried calling the Benefit Centre with the information but couldn't get through. The call used all £6.20 of the client's phone credit. The client was finding the situation stressful and as he has no more phone credit he came to the CAB. The CAB agreed to call on his behalf to pass on the number and explain he needs a Support Worker to help him deal with the agency. The adviser called the Benefit Centre number on the client's letter and got a recorded message 'Service unavailable'. The adviser then called Escalation Route 1 phone line several times - always engaged. Then the adviser called Escalation Route 2 phone line several times - also always engaged. The adviser then wrote a letter to the Benefits Agency on the client's behalf as a back-up to calling. The client will post the letter and return to the CAB tomorrow for another adviser to try phoning on his behalf. The adviser reassured the client that he is doing all in his power to comply and that the CAB would be able to confirm this if necessary.

7. These cases are typical of those seen by bureaux across Scotland, and we believe these are systemic problems.
8. In 2011, the Trussell Trust, the biggest food bank provider in Scotland, found that the biggest driver of demand for food parcels was problems with the benefits system, including delays in payments and changes in entitlement, generating half (48%) of all referrals. Since then the Trussell Trust have seen a 150% increase in the number of people in Scotland using foodbanks.

Sanctions

9. There has recently been a huge increase in the number and duration of sanctions applied to benefits, and bureaux across Scotland are seeing clients in hardship as a result. We believe the increase in sanctions is one of the primary reasons for a significant increase in the number of JSA cases coming into bureau. Many of these sanctions are applied inappropriately, and sometimes in circumstances over which the client has no control.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has been sanctioned by the Jobcentre because he failed to attend his interview scheduled for 10.50am. The reason was that he had a job interview at 11am. The client receives low rate DLA and has dyspraxia, which means he is unable to properly manage day to day affairs and becomes disorganised. He will receive no money for the next two weeks and has no access to food or heating.

An West of Scotland CAB reports that a client presented at the bureau, having been sanctioned from JSA after breaking his Jobseekers agreement. The client stated that he had not been fully engaged in looking for work because his three month old son is seriously ill in hospital and he was at his bedside following kidney failure. As a result of sanction the client had no money for food. His 10 year old daughter stays with him at weekends. The client was referred to the Crisis Food Bank. The bureaux comments "there are clear guidelines about the use of discretion when decision makers opt for sanctions but in this case they appear to have been ignored."

An East of Scotland CAB reports that a client has had her JSA sanctioned for 6 weeks for failing to attend a work programme provider interview. JobCentre Plus has now admitted that they sent the letter to the wrong address. There is often confusion with her property called "--- Cottage" at no.21 and a couple of doors up called "--- House". The local Jobcentre have not been helpful (apart from one person finally), and the client is distressed by her inability to get someone to take responsibility and to get her the money due. The client has had no money for 5 weeks. Once her sanction expires she has been told she will not receive any money for a further two weeks. She is diabetic and lives on her own. She tried for a Crisis Loan but was rejected because she has been sanctioned. The client is in dire straits financially. She had not been informed of the option to apply for Hardship Payments.

A South of Scotland CAB reports of a client who had had his claim for JSA sanctioned for forgetting to bring his job search papers with him, which he had left in the pocket of his other jacket. He had forgotten them as a result of being distracted following the unexplained death of his mother. He appealed against it but was obliged to do this in the Job Centre, and was not allowed to take the papers home. His appeal was refused, and the client was distressed by this. He has no food, no money in the bank, no money for gas and electricity, is having problems paying his rent and is accruing bank charges. He has been turned down for hardship payments because he is healthy and single with no dependants.

10. Our evidence clearly suggests that sanctions are being imposed in circumstances over which the claimant has no control. Claimants are often not aware of the reason for the sanction, and so sanctions are not acting as a disincentive to non-compliance with the jobseekers agreement.
11. It appears that Jobcentres are sometimes using sanctions as a threat towards clients. Clients come in to bureaux anxious that they will be sanctioned for things like a lack of literacy, an inability to use computers, etc, and not knowing what

they can do to avoid being sanctioned. Many of the cases we provide in other parts of this evidence submission involve sanctioning of benefits, or threats of sanctions.

12. We have also seen numerous examples where clients say they have not received written notification of a sanction. We have raised this with DWP officials, who tell us it is not possible for this to happen. Yet we have had clients tell us this repeatedly, from all areas of Scotland.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who came into the Bureau as he has not received his JSA for the past 10 weeks, except for one hardship payment. The client advised that he has not received any written confirmation regarding this sanction. His housing benefit has stopped as a result of this and he has now fallen into rent arrears, and has received a final letter before court proceedings begin. The client said that he has no money at the moment and had been refused a crisis grant. The CAB called the DWP, who said that the client's JSA was suspended ten weeks ago, although they did not disclose why, and that the client has been receiving regular hardship payments since then. They also said that the client should have received a payment today. The client said that he disagreed that he has received payments and wanted to make a complaint about this. The CAB advised the client that he is still eligible for housing benefit, even though he is not being paid JSA at the moment.

13. There is some confusion between the difference between benefits being stopped, suspended or sanctioned. If a claimant fails to turn up to an appointment at the Jobcentre or with a Work Programme provider, their benefit claim is suspended until the claimant comes back to the Jobcentre. Then they will need to submit their reasons for failing to attend, at which point a decision will be made as to whether the claimant's benefit should be sanctioned for failing to attend. However, we see many clients who have not received notification of their appointments (particularly in relation to appointments with Work Programme providers – see below), meaning that they do not know that they should have attended, that their benefit has been suspended or that they need to submit reasons for not attending.
14. This also causes confusion with linked benefits, primarily housing benefit and council tax benefit, and clients sometimes lose entitlement to these benefits as a result of suspension of JSA.
15. Once a client has been sanctioned they are unlikely to have access to any income, unless they can borrow money off family or friends or are eligible for Jobcentre hardship funds. They will not be eligible for Crisis Grants (formerly part of the Social Fund, now administered by the Scottish Welfare Fund) because they have been sanctioned. Since April 2013, CAS has for the first time started to record the number of food bank referrals made by bureaux. The new longer sanctions regime only came into force at the end of 2012. Already we have seen a number of cases of people with diabetes coming to bureaux having being sanctioned and not eaten for several days. In the long term the increase in the sanctions regime could have a significant impact on other services, including the NHS.

Approaches to job seeking

16. Scottish citizens advice bureaux often see cases which suggest that Jobcentre Plus focuses on benefit off-flows, rather than finding meaningful and sustainable work for claimants.

An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client who is a single mother receiving JSA. She was part of the Work Programme and as a result started a job with an online telesales company. The Work Programme provider says she should be getting 30 hours of work per week and told the client these hours were guaranteed. However she is on a zero hours contract. The company have told her that hours are not guaranteed, and that the position is technically self-employed. So far she has only received 4 hours of work from the company. She feels pressurised by the Work Programme provider to 'sign off' and claim Working Tax Credit instead of JSA but the client is worried her hours will not be enough to support her and her young child.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a 19 year old client who has a zero hours contract with a major high street retailer. He has had no work, and therefore no income, for the past two months. He had been to Job Centre plus to ask about JSA for the weeks he did not get any work. They informed him he was not eligible for JSA - as he had a contract for work it would not be possible to give him JSA for the times he was not earning.

An East of Scotland CAB reports a client who has a joint claim for Jobseekers Allowance with his fiancée. He has previously worked as a scaffolder and completed 'Part 1' training and is desperate to return to paid work. He is aware that a scaffolding company are recruiting around 100 scaffolders to work on the decommissioning of a local power station. He has sourced training (Part 2 scaffolding and health & safety) and his family have paid for the training costs. He informed the local Jobcentre, as the training lasts 10 days and is based in England, meaning he would miss two signing-on days. The Jobcentre told him that he is only allowed one 'exclusion' and he cannot miss two signing-on days or he will be sanctioned and benefit payments stopped indefinitely. The client cannot risk going with no money for an indefinite period of time, especially as it would affect not just himself, but his fiancée, her two children and possibly their as-yet unborn baby. He feels staff at JCP were unhelpful and obstructive and preventing him from doing something which would greatly increase his chances of getting paid work. He feels he now has no option other than to cancel training (and very possibly lose the money paid) so that his benefit is not stopped. This will also reduce his chances of getting a job.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has been forced to resign from a new job, which had a one month lying time (so she would not get paid for two months), after she was given a three month sanction on her JSA. This left her with no money to live on or for bus fares to get to work. The client's employment history is complicated and she believes the information the sanction was based on is incorrect.

A West of Scotland CAB saw a client whose JSA had been sanctioned for 16 weeks because he did not take a job. Attending the job would have involved a four hour commute.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who is a single parent with a seven year old daughter. Her JSA adviser has told her she is to start an employment training scheme for 25 hours a week unpaid. The client feels she is unable to do this because of her childcare responsibilities.

A North of Scotland CAB reports of a client who is a single parent and in receipt of JSA. She lives in a rural village and it costs her £7.25 to take the bus through to Inverness to sign on. Client wishes to know if there is any help available with her travel expenses as it amounts to a significant proportion of her benefit. She is also required to look for jobs online using Universal Jobmatch five times a week. The client does not have internet at home and cannot afford a computer. It costs her over a pound a day to take the bus to her local town to use the computers in the library. During the school holidays she will have to take her daughter in with her every day as well as she has no childcare options. As part of her jobseekers agreement she is required to apply for jobs within a 3 hour travel range. The client is aware that if she does not meet the conditions of her agreement she may be subject to sanctions and again is worried about this. The client also noted that she has encountered other jobseekers at the library who have been very stressed by the online jobseeking process as they have never used a computer before. The client has had to assist them with setting up an email account and other basics regarding accessing information via the internet.

17. In June 2012, CAS published a report containing the findings of a survey of graduates. A quarter of respondents said that they were in employment which underutilised their skills. 78% of respondents said that Jobcentre Plus had been unhelpful in finding them a graduate level job while only 2% found the support offered there to be helpful. One 25 year old graduate in Law said that, "At the group meetings we were encouraged to leave any degree off the CV to help us find more plentiful unskilled work. Nobody would employ me as a cleaner if I had a degree. I was told to stop looking for graduate work and take a 'survival' job."

18. When Universal Credit comes in fully, Jobcentres will have a new role in supporting people already in work who do not meet the minimum earnings threshold to find better paid work or more hours of work to bring them up to the minimum threshold. CAS believes that Jobcentres will have to improve their practices significantly in order to meet the needs of this new client group and the complexities, including major investment in training and revision of administrative systems. For example, appointments with the Jobcentre and Work Programme providers and prospective employers will have to be made with more notice and flexibility so that claimants can fit them around their working hours, and claimants should be able to rearrange appointments much more easily than currently.

An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client who was called for an interview with a Work Programme provider. However the previous day she was starting a college course and could not attend. She informed the Jobcentre who said they would pass the message on, but they did not. She has been told her benefit may be stopped.

19. Dealing with job search for in-work claimants will have to be handled with extreme sensitivity and discretion. Jobs at the lower end of the labour market can be very insecure, and we would be extremely concerned if the way job seeking requirements put claimants' existing employment at risk. The judgements involved in calculating whether someone is better off taking on new work will be complex, and will depend on a wide range of factors, for example commuting distance and time, available public transport, caring responsibilities,

the availability and cost of local childcare, employment patterns of the partner where there are shared caring responsibilities, length of contract etc.

JCP's role with regard to contracted-out services

20. Citizens Advice Scotland has raised concerns about the contracting out of aspects of social security over several years. The evidence we see in bureaux attests to the reality of our concerns. Accountability for different aspects of benefits administration is becoming increasingly opaque and means that bureau clients find it very difficult to get resolution to their benefits problems, as blame is transferred to other parts of the system, while the claimant is left without income.
21. By far the biggest area of benefits advice demand is generated by ESA claims. The problems with Atos are well-rehearsed and have been raised continually by CAS and other organisations over recent years. Yet progress towards getting movement on these issues appears to have been slow, and bureaux in Scotland continue to see around 700 cases every month regarding issues with the Work Capability Assessment.
22. The following case suggests that further aspects of the benefits system are being contracted out by the DWP, who are then saying there is nothing can be done about the practice of the contractor.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who came to the bureau seeking help as her JSA was stopped. She was told that she was late in submitting reasons for not signing on. The client says she sent the relevant documents in time but the regional Benefits Centre say they did not receive them till 10 days after she says she sent them. The local Jobcentre has told her to reapply for JSA, and she made an online application a month ago. The client never heard any more about this claim. Then the client made a second application for JSA a week later, and was told paperwork would be sent to her. The client did not receive any papers. The CAB adviser phoned the Benefits Centre to enquire about client's online JSA application. The bureau adviser was told it was a private firm that handles online applications and if it went missing there is nothing they can do about it.

23. The following cases all involve sanctions applied to claimants' benefits as a result of interactions with Work Programme providers. In each case there appears to be good reason why the claimant should not be sanctioned, but in some of the cases the DWP upheld the sanction despite the presentation of evidence.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client whose JSA had been sanctioned. The Jobcentre said it was because he had missed an appointment with an external adviser. But the client had written confirmation that he had attended all of his scheduled appointments and he had provided this to the Jobcentre. He was informed that the decision maker who had imposed the sanction had looked at this evidence, but the sanction would still stand.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has had his JSA sanctioned. The sanction came after the client had received several pieces of correspondence from the Work Programme provider with no postage paid. On one occasion it cost him £5.50 to go to the sorting office and get the letter cleared. He informed the provider of this and told them he couldn't keep paying to get their letters. The next time it happened he refused to collect the letter and so was sanctioned. He was not informed about the sanction until he found the

money had not been received. He asked for a reconsideration, providing evidence from the Royal Mail, but the DWP have not changed their original decision.

A South of Scotland CAB reports of a client who is on JSA but has been sanctioned for non-appearance at an appointment made for her by Ingeus on the 27th of the month. The client said she had not been informed about it either by letter, email, phone or text message. In the sanction letter she has received from DWP it seems Ingeus told them that she had been informed four days (on the 23rd) prior to the appointment. The client did not know anything about this until she received a letter from her personal adviser at Ingeus giving her an appointment a week after the appointment on the 3rd of the following month which the client had to move to two days later because of a prior appointment. It was only now that the client became aware of the original appointment when the personal adviser spoke about sanctions. The bureau comments "this bureau regularly sees clients who have been sanctioned for missing appointments, despite the client not receiving any notice of them."

A South of Scotland CAB reports of a client on JSA who attends meetings with A4E every 3 weeks. The client has had his JSA sanctioned for missing an appointment, but he did not receive the appointment letter. This was the first appointment he had missed in 6 months. The client subsequently received the letter. He has applied for a hardship payment which he will receive in 2 weeks, but in the meantime has no money for electricity, gas or food. He cannot get a Crisis Loan because he has been sanctioned.

24. We have raised each of these cases with the DWP. Their response was that claimants should make use of the Work Programme provider's complaints procedure. We believe this response is inadequate, ignores the injustice of these cases, the hardship caused to the claimants, and the responsibility of DWP to hold its contractors to account.

25. Where clear evidence is presented to show that a claimant is not at fault, sanctions should not be imposed. Where they have been imposed in such circumstances, decision makers must be empowered to lift the sanction without recourse to the reconsideration or appeals processes.

26. The DWP must hold Work Programme providers and other contractors to account for their quality of service and use of public funds, and they must be transparent in the way they do this.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who took on a job believing it would last for four weeks, but after 3 days was told the placement had finished. He made an application for a rapid reclaim of JSA but did not receive any money. When he asked why, he was told he had been sanctioned for failing to turn up to the work placement, even though he had been told it had finished. He has no money for electricity or gas and has no food. He is concerned that he will not be able to pay his rent on Tuesday.

Universal Jobmatch

27. We have seen a number of problems arising from Universal Jobmatch. On a recent search of jobs in Edinburgh¹ with the search parameters set to 'full time' jobs, CAS found that there were 7 jobs on the first 8 pages of search results where the jobs were advertised in the heading as 'part time' – one of those jobs had as few as 2 hours per day. This analysis is simply of the jobs which were called 'part time' in the title and does not include those which were listed as full time with as little as 8 hours.
28. As it stands, this mechanism is not suitable for matching candidates with appropriate jobs. The automatic nature of the site means that jobseekers will be sanctioned for failing to apply for jobs they are 'matched' with – even if the job is mislabelled on the site. All options given to the jobseeker on the site for not applying for the job are sanctionable and these sanctions will be automatic with no element of discretion.
29. We have also several clients who have been sanctioned because their jobsearches have failed to register on the Universal Jobmatch. Whether these problems are due to the client's inexperience with computers or to the system itself, they should not result in a financial penalty to the client of the loss of their income.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who sought advice as his Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) had been sanctioned for 2 weeks because he was not registering his job searches online correctly. He says he was going on to Direct Gov website and varies others to look at suitable employment but had no knowledge of actually how to do it properly. He was told he must use the official Direct Gov and register each time he was on. He didn't receive any advice on the use of websites and computers and made mistakes - so received the sanction. He was told of his sanction 15/03/2013, appealed this at the time, was told on Tuesday 19/03/2013 that this had been denied. Applied for Hardship loan but this couldn't be faxed through at that time. He has applied for a reconsideration of his sanction but has no idea when this will be heard. He is planning to go back daily to check on the progress. He is single and lives alone, no dependents, no other income or savings. He receives Housing Benefit.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who attended the bureau very concerned that he was about to be sanctioned by DWP and his Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) stopped. Client has been attending a computer course at the local library. He has been attending regularly with no problems - his last day was last Friday when he made 3 job applications. He attended Jobcentre to sign on yesterday and the adviser indicated that the applications had not registered properly on the system which may liable him to sanctioning. They will investigate, and he was told to call back on Thursday to find out the decision. The adviser comments: "It is my understanding that there have been a lot of problems with the online job search and application system provided by gov.uk. This client may be penalised as a result of his applications not registering properly. The client is not particularly confident with computers - hence the course - and so should not be penalised/sanctioned because of a computer/system error."

¹ Search completed 17th January 2012

30. We have had a number of cases of clients saying that when they registered with Universal Jobmatch they found that the Jobcentre adviser could access their personal email account. We have raised this with DWP, who have told us that it is not possible for this to happen, but we continue to receive cases where clients say it is happening, the latest coming into bureau within the last seven days. This is very worrying and raises grave concerns about confidentiality and data protection for clients.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client told by the Jobcentre to register with Universal Jobmatch. He was very disturbed when he realised that this opened up his personal files including personal e-mails and Facebook account. As he is no longer able to look for work he wants to cancel his account with this website but has found it extremely difficult to access the necessary website and has also had difficulty getting help from various agencies.

An East Scotland CAB reports of a client who is claiming JSA and has been told to log onto a universal jobseeking website to look for work. This involves the client providing his email address. When the client goes to the Jobcentre he is asked to access the site by putting in his password so that the adviser can see what jobs he has applied for. The client strongly feels that this is an invasion of his privacy and is worried that his personal details could be accessed by people he doesn't know.

A West of Scotland CAB reports: "One of our volunteers is claiming JSA and has been signed up to 'Universal Jobsearch' by the DWP. Unknown to clients, when they click to accept the terms and conditions, this seems to give DWP advisers full access to the client's personal email account and the adviser is able to view all of the client's emails. Our volunteer saw all her emails appear on the adviser's screen when the adviser opened her universal jobsearch page."

A South of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has been asked by the DWP to give them her email address and password so that they can get proof she is looking for work. The adviser says "I have heard other clients being asked for this information. I feel this could be a violation to the data protection act as well as the individual's right to privacy."

Impact of benefits reforms on JCP staff roles

31. A survey of 1200 Scottish bureau clients who came in to resolve benefits issues in May 2013 found that 36% had never used the internet, and a further 11% had hardly ever used it. Only half (54%) have an internet connection at home.
32. Three quarters (76%) of clients felt that would struggle to apply for a benefit online, even with help. Half of these (49%) said this was because they had never used a computer before. 16% said their main barrier was health related.
33. This has serious implications for Jobcentre staff. Even if the number of Internet Access Devices is substantially increased in Jobcentres, as the Government plans, many clients may need help to make benefits applications, maintain their benefits claims, and search for jobs online. Some clients will need substantial help. Jobcentre staff will need to take a much more supportive approach towards clients who have difficulties using computers and the internet and will require training to support these clients, particularly where they have disability or literacy-related difficulties. We have seen a number of recent cases where claimants

have not been able to use a computer, either because they do not have physical access or because they do not have the skills, and where the Jobcentre has told the claimant to go to the CAB or local library. In some of these cases the local CAB has no facilities to provide internet access.

A North of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has to undertake job seeking activity in order to receive JSA. The client has been declined ESA despite requiring daily methadone and other prescription drugs. He sees a community psychiatric nurse every two weeks. The client told the Job Centre adviser that he does not have a PC and that he does not have even basic PC skills, but he was told to go to a CAB or library for help. The client also has low levels of literacy and is concerned that he will be sanctioned as he needs help to complete his job seeking activity booklet.

A South of Scotland CAB reports of a client who is a homeless referral as he is currently sofa surfing. He was paid off from his job 3 weeks ago. He is unsure how to claim benefits. The adviser contacted JCP to make a claim for JSA. The adviser informed her they no longer take applications by telephone and advised the client to go to the library. The client states he is unable to use the computer. The JCP adviser spoke to her manager and will allow the claim to be taken over the telephone, however the client will be put forward to do a computer course. The client stated he would be delighted to do a computer course, and the JCP adviser then pointed out there was no guarantee client would be put on a computer course.

Engagement with DWP

34. The expectation from DWP is that all communication with DWP regarding operational issues is channelled through DWP partnership managers. We recognise that this may have benefits for the DWP in enabling them to co-ordinate communication and maintain clear and consistent messaging. However, from our point of view, it means that when trying to communicate the reality of how policy and procedures are actually being implemented on the ground as experienced by bureaux and their clients, it is often hard to get recognition from officials that the reality may be different from the policy.

35. The DWP's approach of limiting contact with key voluntary sector stakeholders is not one that we have experienced working with any other government department. It reduces the transparency of the Department, and may mean that DWP are less responsive to dealing with operational problems and responding to feedback than they could be.

Conclusion

36. Citizens Advice Scotland is concerned about the trends it is seeing in the citizens advice bureau service across Scotland, particularly in relation to the poor administration of benefits. We are seeing an increase in the number of clients coming to bureaux with benefits issues. But the circumstances of those clients are increasingly vulnerable. The increasing rigidity of benefits administration through requirements such as online applications for JSA, and the use of Universal Jobmatch, combine with an increasingly stringent regime of sanctions and threats of sanctions in a disturbing way.

37. From our engagement with DWP we have been told that, according to DWP policies and procedures, the situations we describe cannot be happening. Yet bureaux are continuing to report clients coming in with these same problems.
38. As a result of the practices outlined here, growing numbers of bureau clients are being left in desperate circumstances with no access to money for food, energy and in some cases money for rent.
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For more information, please contact Beth Reid, Social Policy Officer, at beth.reid@cas.org.uk or 0131 550 1062.