Briefing on findings from Disability Benefits Consortium (DBC) survey #UCandMe

Experience of Work Coaches under Universal Credit

May 2019

About the DBC

The DBC is a coalition of over 80 different disability organisations working towards a fair benefits system.

About this briefing

This is a summary of findings from the #UCandMe survey organised by the DBC, which ran until the end of February 2019.

It is one of three briefings on different aspects of the findings. The other two are “Experience of moving onto Universal Credit” and “Experience of the Work Capability Assessment under Universal Credit”.

Overview/ background of respondents

- 476 who responded to the survey said that they are claiming or have claimed Universal Credit (UC) in the past, and 395 of those eventually received UC.
- 64% of respondents claiming/ having claimed UC were female.
- 87% of respondents claiming/ having claimed UC were aged between 26-64.
- 81% of respondents claiming/ having claimed UC were in England, 13% in Scotland, 4% in Wales and almost 2% in Northern Ireland.
- 73% of respondents claiming/ having claimed UC said they lived alone, with 27% saying they lived with a partner.
- 21% of respondents claiming/ having claimed UC said that they lived with dependent children.
- Close to 70% of respondents claiming/ having claimed UC said that they were in receipt of Disability Living Allowance or Personal Independence Payment.
- 50% of respondents claiming/ having claimed UC said they were too unwell to work, with no plans to work in the future.
- Of the 395 respondents who eventually received UC, 85% said all or most of their income came from UC.
- 43% of those claiming or having claimed UC said that they had previously received Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

Large groups responding included:

- Mental health (depression) – 211
- Mental Health (anxiety) – 199
- Osteoarthritis – 110
- Mental health (other) – 80
- Fibromyalgia – 82

However, responses were received from a wide variety of disability and condition groups.

Experience with Work Coaches under UC

(All respondents below are claiming or have claimed UC in the past).

Would the knowledge that your doctor or health professional is trying to support you to return to work change your attitude towards their care?

- 18% said it would make me more likely to visit them
- 48% said it would make no difference
- 14% said it would make me less likely to visit them
- 20% said they didn't know

Would you like to get support from health professionals to move towards work?

- 19% said yes
- 46% said no
- 35% said not sure or it depends

Comments:

> "The only good thing I can say is when I need to change appointments stating I can't afford to travel, [my Work Coach] allows me to make a new appointment once and my Work Coach is very understanding but has no real knowledge of my issues".

> "Most people do not understand my disability and the difficulties I have regarding work…. I am forced to complete things to get work at the same level as the abled. No account is taken of the fact that day-to-day life is full of difficulties that the abled do not have".

> "My GP has always been supportive of my needs regarding employment. He has supported me in and out of employment for the past 20 years. His only concern is my health and what I feel able to do".

> "It would make me more comfortable with my visits".

“To explore options available for returning to work”.

“I go to the doctor for medical treatment, not to be assessed for fitness to work”.

“That should be what they do”.

“I couldn’t keep up at my job, even with the advice and support from my dedicated healthcare professionals”.

“What would be of great benefit is adequate mental health support, to help with my current health. Had this been in place, I may well have been able to return to work sooner”.

“This is tricky. I would value support if it was on my terms and I wasn’t being pushed into something I can’t do or I am not ready for. If I’m to work it must be in a supportive framework that doesn’t penalise me if I get ill or limit my benefits”.

“I am the best person to know what is best for my health and wellbeing. I appreciate the help and advice but feel pressured into doing something that I know isn’t right for me”.

“I would feel supported”.

“I would like support to get back into work, but there are no jobs that fit my needs”.

“My doctor regularly asks me how things are going and often advises me not to push my limits too far. He also understands the unpredictability of my condition and the impact it has”.

“It would depend a lot on whether I trusted my doctor to do the right thing and whether they were overly influenced by or under the control of the DWP”.

“I do not want my doctor to feel pressured into making me do anything the government directs them to. I only want them to provide medical care and provide help that is in the best interests for my health”.

“I’d want my doctor to listen and hear me, trust me. I hate being forced into work by the government and I’d want my doctor to be on my side”.

“I would rather use the limited time I have with my doctor to discuss my condition”.

A lot of people talked about their condition and how working was just not an option for them, now or in the future.

Comments:

> “Rife with the medical model of disability”.
>
> “I would like the social model to be used so I don’t have to behave as neuro-typicals”.
>
> “They know my situation is changeable daily, so their support in helping to find work that fits around my condition would really make a big difference in making sure I was reliable, secure and able to reduce my stress levels”.
>
> “If I get harassed or intimidated to then no”.
>
> “Anything would be better than having to go through the disability process the government inflicts on people”.
>
> “It would depend on who the health professionals are employed by. If it was the DWP or an agency working for them, I would be worried that their motivation would be to get me into any job regardless. The only health professionals I trust now are those employed by the NHS as they don’t have any ulterior motives. Any help provided must not have targets”.
>
> “It would make a difference, but I don’t think they have the time or energy to be giving me career advice. It could worsen my health if they are pressuring me back into work”.
>
> “I would if the benefits system made it simple for disabled people to have flexibility in work and pay, without having to worry about changes to UC payments every month”.
>
> “We already have health professionals testing disabled people for their entitlement to benefits. I don’t trust the government to provide a fair and compassionate service to enable employment”.
>
> “As long as the expectations are realistic within my abilities and an employer can be found that would be sympathetic to my condition”.
>
> “I would like support from health professionals. That is what they are trained for”.
>
> “It would be beneficial for me to get extra support in finding a job from professional bodies who better understand my condition. At the moment, the

job search coach I have been assigned is not understanding and makes me feel like she just doesn't care about my condition".

"Work-related issues should be provided by a specialist not medical professionals who do not have experience of getting people into work. Doctors are not trained for this role".

"I think I do have a good advisor at my jobcentre that is really helping me and does take my conditions into account".

"Not if it involves DWP".

"Possibly if the health professionals got to know me and didn't just read notes on a screen".

"I have help from family. I do not trust anyone else. I have had too many bad experiences".

"I already have a few organisations helping me towards returning to work, plus a UC coach".

"Anyone who understands would be great. I am fed up of being bullied by the jobcentre".

"I would like support to cope better with my condition day to day. Not sure I'll ever be able to work again if I don't get that".

"I have huge concerns about the government working with healthcare. Data protection, patient confidentiality etc. Plus the main job of the doctor is healing, not forcing someone into government workfare".

"I would but only from my GP who knows me and my condition".

"It's employers that need incentive and support to recruit people like me".

"This is something I would prefer to do personally".

"Most health professionals I find have no empathy and do not understand the practicalities of moving into work whilst on UC".

"It depends if it is genuine help, or compulsion based on DWP/ jobcentre".

"I would rather be in control of this myself. There are no government officials I trust anymore".

"From someone who understands my condition? Yes. However, GPs are not often knowledgeable enough".

> “They know more than DWP staff”.
>
> “I’d take help from anyone, but the problem isn’t the health sector, it’s employers”.
>
> “I just want support for medical issues. It’s hard enough to get that from the NHS as it is, let alone getting them to support you into work”.
>
> “It depends if I would be penalised or not”.

If you are out of work, what do you feel are the biggest barriers to you returning to work?

(more than one might apply)

- 28% said lack of money
- 24% said a worry about reduction in benefits
- 23% said inappropriate back-to-work support from Work Coaches
- 25% said not enough back-to-work support
- 18% said it was the impact of sanctions
- 77% said it was the impact of their condition
- 48% said employers wouldn’t hire them
- 27% said it was unsuitable hours

Quotes:

> “I don’t want to be helped by the jobcentre or other agencies. It feels coercive”.
>
> “The Work Coach at the jobcentre has made it very clear to me that it is my sole responsibility to find work quickly, also, they refused to see me on my second appointment as they didn’t have time that day”.
>
> “There isn’t really anything I can do to improve my working situation although if I had a job broker who knew the subject area I work in and would recommend me to organisations for mini projects then I perhaps could get more work”.
>
> “The pressure to get any job which could impact my condition is a fear. Work needs to be sustainable. There is no support for having to change career. I was told I could access training relating to my last employment only. As I had to retire due to my condition, why isn’t support to change career given?”

A key part of UC is interacting with Work Coaches. What is your view of the following statements?

My Work Coach understood my disability or health condition:

- 11% strongly agreed
- 15% agreed
- 18% disagreed
- 30% strongly disagreed

My Work Coach understood what support I need:

- 9.5% strongly agreed
- 11% agreed
- 17% disagreed
- 33% strongly disagreed

They took into account how my symptoms or other aspects of my disability or health condition fluctuates:

- 9% strongly agreed
- 11% agreed
- 17% disagreed
- 33% strongly disagreed

I trust them to set reasonable expectations of what I can do:

- 9% strongly agreed
- 12% agreed
- 16% disagreed
- 34% strongly disagreed

They treated me with respect and were polite to me:

- 17% strongly agreed
- 31% agreed
- 9% disagreed
- 15% strongly disagreed

Your Work Coach asked you to sign a claimant commitment. What were you asked to do?

(more than one might apply)

- 17% were asked to search for a full-time job
- 15% were asked to search for a part-time job
- 10% were asked to do some training
- 3% were asked to increase their hours or get a second job
- 5% were asked to see an occupational health thereapist
- 38% didn’t ask the claimant to do anything because they recognised they were unable to, due to their disability or health condition

Did your work coach take account of your impairment or condition when planning the activities they asked you to do?

- 34% said yes
- 32% said no
- 34% said they didn’t know

Did you explain to your work coach that your requirements weren’t appropriate?

- 45% said yes
- 20% said no
- 35% said they didn’t know

Interactions with work coaches and the claimant commitment

What happened?

- 29% said they were listened to and the commitment was adjusted
- 33% said they weren’t listened to and the commitment remained the same

Have you ever been sanctioned?

- 17% said yes
- 77% said no
- 6% said they didn’t know

What was the impact of your sanction?

(more than one was possible)

- 42% said they couldn’t eat
- 44% said they couldn’t heat their home
- 56% got behind with bills
- 35% got behind with rent or mortgage
- 57% borrowed money from friends and family
- 9% were evicted
- 2% lost their job
- 58% cut back on essentials
- 42% had to go to a foodbank (44 people out of the 106 people who said they were sanctioned)

Quotes:

> “I had to get hardship payments which then further reduced my benefit once the sanction was completed”.

> “The sanction reduced my payment and took my PIP into consideration as savings. This meant I lost the money that is intended to help me with living with a disability, leaving me housebound and unable to get the support I need or to fix my wheelchair”.
>
> “My mental health deteriorated and I attempted suicide”.
>
> “The most demeaning time of my life”.
>
> “The DWP admitted it was a mistake at their end, but I was sanctioned anyway”.
>
> “I have been sanctioned twice, both times because of a DWP admin. error. I was supported by a CAB worker who helped me. The DWP said I shouldn’t have been sanctioned but by then it was too late. I had no money for six weeks”.
>
> “I’m awaiting a decision on a possible sanction after taking voluntary redundancy because of my condition”.
>
> “I was in hospital on a drip when I was meant to attend a jobcentre appointment. When I submitted my documents, I received a decision upholding my sanction stating that I’d failed to comply with my agreement by missing my appointment”.
>
> “I tried to kill myself”.

Would you like to tell us anything else about your experiences of work coaches?

234 people responded to this question.

Quotes:

> “I deal with my Work Coach online. They always get back to me and try to help and explain to the best of their ability. They always get in touch if they need any information”.
>
> “My Work Coach is amazing. She is understanding and supportive”.
>
> “Totally unaware of the barriers disabled people face and unable to make it accessible”.
>
> “Always kind and friendly”.
>
> “The Work Coaches don’t seem to understand UC and don’t help me with my benefits”.

“The staff are limited on what they can do, so they pass the buck to central office staff”.

“The Work Coach I have is very helpful”.

“They just threaten me”.

“My Work Coach at no time referred me into DWP vulnerable clients hub, nor discussed that such a hub existed”.

“At no time were my vulnerabilities discussed with my Work Coach. I was never referred into the hub”.

“The Work Coach did not understand my conditions and the difficulties I face trying to manage an online account. I felt I was not treated as an individual, just a claimant. I felt intimidated to do what was required and the Work Coach just kept saying I would get sanctioned”.

“Work Coach seemed to be advising on things that were outside her knowledge base”.

“The jobcentre staff were fantastic”.

“Work Coaches don’t coach, they oversee the benefit with the intention of handing out sanctions. They take no account of my condition and the difficulties I face just trying to function every day”.

“My Work Coach didn’t explain anything properly or give me satisfactory answers”.

“I’m unsure who my Work Coach is, it seems to change every time I go in. The jobcentre staff are pleasant enough and seem as confused as the claimant when it comes to UC”.

“The job coach had to telephone me monthly and explained she had no understanding of my condition, but knew I was beyond work and unable to visit”.

“My Work Coach is generally understanding, but I think that’s because she cares for her elderly mother”.

“Mine has been very helpful and understanding about my work and health situation”.

“My Work Coach often ignores journal messages and doesn’t respond. She also seems to get confused about any UC details other than the bog standard ones. If she has to correct something that she’s done wrong or admit an error was made, she will telephone me, but that means there is no written evidence on my journal”.

“The Work Coach didn’t have enough experience in dealing with Parkinson’s and had to keep getting advice from other members of staff”.

“Mine was only interested in forcing me into work and didn’t listen to my limitations. I was told I was able to apply for any position. They didn’t care that I had a chronic illness”.

“I’ve found it impossible to contact my Work Coach”.

“I refused my Work Coach initially as frankly, she did not have the skills to support me. Luckily I was then referred to a manager who recognised my needs and was supportive”.

“Thankfully my Work Coach is amazing. He does everything within his power to assist me”.

“I don’t see the need to see a Work Coach when I have a chronic condition and I can’t work”.

“Job coach was understanding as I was able to provide a fit note. He calls me every so often via telephone”.

“I was lucky my Work Coach was respectful, friendly and helpful. From other people I know that this is not normally the case”.

“My Work Coach was not fully trained on UC and how it works”.

“My Work Coach was very supportive”.

“My Work Coach recognised how unwell I am and does my interviews over the phone so I don’t have to leave the house”.

“The Work Coaches I have dealt with are unsympathetic, they don’t understand my mental health”.

“The Work Coach was very pleasant. She had heard of my condition but had no understanding of how it affects the body and mind”.

“Very helpful and understanding”.

“My Work Coach was excellent and helped me whenever I needed”.

“Work Coach was dismissive of my condition and told me people worse than me manage to work. She made me feel like a sponger, or a fraud”.

> “My experiences of Work Coaches is awful. They have little knowledge of the system and it has been left to me to tell them what is happening with my claim”.
>
> “My job coach was very helpful and was also frustrated by the new system. He arranged telephone appointments to help my mobility and to minimise the amount to travel. We keep in touch via the online journal”.
>
> “The more I saw my Work Coach the more she realised how much pain it was causing me having to travel 25 miles every week. We started to have phone appointments instead”.
>
> “I receive telephone appointments every three months, which is very helpful and seems to satisfy my Work Coach”.

Conclusion

The findings of our survey show that there is deep ambivalence about the operation of the work coaching system, with very varied experiences, but including strong feedback that the real nature and impact of claimants’ conditions need to be properly understood and respected. The consequences of not doing so can be very serious.