

## **PRESS RELEASE**

5 August, 2014

### **ROTHERHAM MPs CALL FOR SANCTIONS REVIEW**

Rotherham's three MPs have called on the Government to review its process of 'sanctioning' jobseekers.

It follows a report by Rotherham Council which noted sanctioning has increased and is sometimes unfair or inappropriate.

In Rotherham last year around 534 sanctions were imposed each month – an increase of 17 per cent on the previous 12 months.

National media reports last year suggested there was pressure to apply sanctions and a targets culture in job centres. This was supported by a recent survey of job centre staff by the PCS union.

Sanctions are applied when claimants are judged to have not met requirements – like attending an interview or being available for work – and results in benefit payments being suspended for at least four weeks.

In a joint letter to Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith, John Healey, Sarah Champion and Sir Kevin Barron said:

“Sanctions are a necessary part of the benefits system, ensuring jobseekers are preparing and looking for work, but the current sanctions process is inefficient and unfit for purpose.

“Often sanctions pile more pressure on already vulnerable individuals and families, exacerbating health problems and actually making it more difficult to look for work.”

In compiling its report, Rotherham Council's overview and scrutiny management board heard from benefits claimants, staff from Jobcentre Plus and advice agencies over a period of six months to March 2014. The review also looked at national and local data and research.

But despite their critical role in the sanctions process the two main work programme providers for South Yorkshire – A4e and Serco – refused to take part, with A4e saying it was on the advice of their DWP account manager.

The review recommended setting up a 'local working protocol' with the aim of ensuring sanctions are used fairly. The group would consist of council officers, advice agencies, Jobcentre Plus staff and Work Programme providers – but A4e and Serco again refused to sign up.

The MPs said in the letter: “This is completely unacceptable. Serco and A4e receive millions of pounds of public money, should be accountable and must be more open about explaining what they do and why it is not working.

“Have work programme providers been instructed by ministers to lie low, not to publish guidance given to them, not to answer questions on their performance and not to cooperate with legitimate local scrutiny from elected representatives?

“We ask your department to ensure that A4e and Serco provide their full cooperation.”

The report said:

- the number of sanctions increased significantly across the country last year
- five per cent of all JSA claimants are sanctioned every month
- sanctions and delays are the reason for nearly 40 per cent of visits to food banks
- just one in three sanction referrals are upheld

It concluded that, as well as setting up a local working protocol, there needed to be:

- better and clearer communication, especially where claimants are vulnerable
- more flexibility and Jobcentre staff able to use discretion – when claimants have caring responsibilities, for example

## Notes to editors

1. Rotherham Council’s ‘*Scrutiny review: Department for Work and Pensions’ Sanctions and Conditionality Regime*’ is available here:  
<http://moderngov.rotherham.gov.uk/documents/s93308/Scrutiny%20Review%20-%20DWP%20Revised.pdf>
2. The PCS survey in which Jobcentre staff report targets and pressure to make sanction referrals can be found here:  
[http://www.pcs.org.uk/en/news\\_and\\_events/pcs\\_comment/index.cfm/sanctions-ineffective-jobcentre-staff-say](http://www.pcs.org.uk/en/news_and_events/pcs_comment/index.cfm/sanctions-ineffective-jobcentre-staff-say)
3. The Government commissioned a review by Matthew Oakley of the sanctions process which was published last month:  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/335144/jsa-sanctions-independent-review.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335144/jsa-sanctions-independent-review.pdf)
4. Compliance ‘doubts’ are raised by Jobcentre staff or Work Programme providers, then a decision on whether to impose a sanction is made by a separate DWP decision-making team.  
Sanctions can be applied for:
  - *Lower level: failure to attend/participate in an interview or training scheme* – 4 weeks loss of benefit for a first failure, rising to 13 weeks for subsequent breaches

- *Intermediate level: failure to be available for work* – disqualification and up to 4 weeks loss of benefit for first failure, increasing to 13 weeks for subsequent failures
- *Higher level: failing to comply with the most important job seeking requirements (ie leaving a job voluntarily or failing to accept a reasonable job offer)* – the sanction can vary from 13 weeks for the first failure to 3 years for a third failure