MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit Consultation Response

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| **Title of consultation** |
| Inquiry into Employment and COVID-19 |
| **Name of the consulting body** |
| House of Lords’ Select Committee on Economic Affairs |
| **Link to consultation** |
| https://committees.parliament.uk/work/480/employment-and-covid19/ |
| **Why did the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit contribute to this consultation?** |
| The MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow conducts world leading research on the determinants of population health and health inequalities, and to develop and test interventions to improve health and reduce inequalities. The Unit’s research uses a wide variety of methods including qualitative research, the collection, linkage, and analysis of social survey and routinely collected data, evidence synthesis, randomised controlled trials, and natural experimental studies. The Inequalities programme has a particular focus on, and expertise in,evaluating the impacts of social security reform. |
| **Our consultation response** |
| The MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow is responding to the following question outlined by the Committee for this Inquiry’s written evidence:1. What lessons can be learned from previous recessions and active labour market policy interventions in the UK? What lessons can be learned from schemes and interventions that have been implemented in other countries?

Summary* + Unemployment has serious economic consequences, but it is also an important determinant of health. Income protection and active labour market programmes (ALMP) can help to mitigate some of the adverse consequences, although evidence suggests that conditionality can have negative health effects.
	+ The UK evidence base on ALMPs is somewhat fragmented. The DWP and its predecessors have evaluated many ALMPs, and a comprehensive synthesis of the findings would provide useful evidence on approaches to labour market activation.
	+ Early analyses of Universal Credit suggested it has positive effects on employment. Evidence for the effects of other DWP interventions is lacking; in particular the employment and health effects of conditionality have not been robustly evaluated.
	+ International studies suggest that sanctions result in increased employment and welfare exits, but this tends to lead to poor quality jobs or labour market exit. Evidence for negative health impacts of sanctions is growing.
	+ Unconditional payments do not seem to lead to large reductions in labour market activity. Earnings supplements or disregards have been shown to increase employment and improve health and child outcomes.
	+ While some DWP studies are robust, their quality is variable and in some cases credibility is
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| undermined by the lack of research protocols published prior to trials commencing. The UK has an abundance of data that would permit robust evaluation of sanctions and other ALMPs.* Findings from reviews of international studies of ALMPs are inconsistent, but well-conducted reviews suggest the effects are small. There is some evidence that effects are stronger for disadvantaged groups, and also that the net effects are small because participants find work at the expense of other job seekers.
* There have been many robust evaluations of ALMPs in the United States. These suggest that earnings supplements and strategic collaborations with employers and industry can have positive effects on employment and earnings.
* Improved work incentives and flexibility in Universal Credit may have positive employment effects, but cuts to the Work Allowance have undermined the work incentive effects and sanctions have negative health impacts.
* In the context of a very severe labour market shock, reversing the Work Allowance cuts and easing conditionality could provide stronger work incentives while reducing poverty and protecting health.

*Economic conditions and health** 1. It is important to bear in mind that while unemployment has serious economic consequences, it is also a major determinant of health. Employed people generally have better health, although this is dependent on job quality and stability. Long-term unemployment has scarring effects on economic and health outcomes, particularly for young people (McQuaid et al 2016). Given that a large proportion of the population may be affected in the post-Covid context, these adverse effects on health will be costly at both an individual and a societal level. Income protection delivered through the social security system is another important health determinant, which may help to mitigate the worst health impacts of job loss. A number of studies suggest that active labour market policies and programmes (ALMP) can have protective effects on health for unemployed people (Puig-Barrachina et al 2020). However, there is evidence that conditionality, one of the most commonly applied approaches to labour market activation, can have serious negative health impacts. In addition to effects on labour market outcomes, it is important to consider the health impacts of ALMPs.

*International evidence on the effects of ALMPs** 1. The evidence base for ALMP in the UK appears to be somewhat fragmented. Many ALMP evaluations are conducted by think tanks, charities, and local authorities, and are not published in academic journals. Consequently, they are not indexed and thus can be difficult to find. Methodologically, they tend to use study designs which do not permit the identification of causal effects, such as before and after studies lacking a comparison or control group. The Department for Work and Pensions has conducted a number of more robust studies, including randomised control trials (RCTs), evaluating a range of approaches to promoting employment. These are also somewhat difficult to locate however, and we are not aware of any publication or website which draws together the reports or findings of all of these studies.
	2. The DWP began conducting RCTs in 1989. Restart evaluated the impact of six-monthly mandatory interviews on unemployment benefit claimants, finding that there was a 5% reduction in unemployment claims (White and Lakey 1992). Since then, we are aware of approximately twenty further DWP RCTS, and at least three interventions evaluated using robust quasi-experimental methods. Most of these evaluations have multiple related publications, and locating and synthesising the evidence from all of these would be a substantial undertaking. Many other DWP interventions have been evaluated using less robust methods. A 2010 DWP review of evidence on ALMP for people aged 50 and above found 27 reports from ten DWP interventions. The authors concluded that little of the evidence could be used to determine the causal impact of the interventions evaluated, because most of the studies lacked a comparison or control group (Vegeris et al 2010). Nonetheless, the DWP’s body of evaluations represents an important source of evidence on ALMP in the UK, and a comprehensive review of these publications would be likely to generate useful insights. We do not attempt to provide an overview of the findings here, as there is a large volume of evidence from interventions using disparate approaches in different populations and in differing socio- economic contexts.
	3. Recent large-scale ALMP implemented by the DWP include the Work Programme, the Work and
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| Health Programme, Universal Credit In-Work Progression, and Lone Parent Obligations. Universal Credit as a whole represents a major change to the activation regime. Four publications on the Work Programme report findings from qualitative interviews with participants, and on various aspects of implementing and delivering the programme. The 2014 qualitative report stated that a quantitative evaluation was very challenging as there was no control group. For this reason, a quasi-experimental analysis was then underway (Meager et al 2014). We could not locate any publications reporting the findings of the quasi- experimental analysis. The National Audit Office reported job outcomes for Work Programme participants compared to those from earlier ALMP, finding that these were similar to those of the voluntary New Deal programmes (NAO 2014). However, this does not constitute a robust approach to measuring an intervention’s effects. An RCT of the Work and Health Programme has yet to report findings, and we could not locate any details of the study design. The available statistics do not compare outcomes for the intervention groups with those of the control group (DWP 2020).* 1. The labour market impacts of Universal Credit were evaluated in 2015 using a quasi-experimental design. Comparing new Universal Credit claimants with a matched sample of JSA claimants, the study found that the probability of being in work 6 months after claiming was 3 percentage points higher for Universal Credit claimants (DWP 2017). It is not possible to discern which aspects of Universal Credit resulted in this employment increase, but both groups were subject to sanctions, so it is unlikely that conditionality caused the increase. More intense support and larger work incentives may have played a role. Qualitative evidence on Universal Credit suggests that having a supportive Work Coach, flexibility around job search activities, and using the Flexible Support Fund to fund training in line with claimants’ needs and aspirations can be helpful. Generic training and excessive job-seeking requirements are reported to be counter-productive (Wright et al 2018, DWP 2017a, Cheetham et al 2018). The status of further planned DWP research on Universal Credit’s labour market impacts is unclear, but a recent study by independent researchers did not find that Universal Credit was associated with becoming employed (Wickham et al 2020).
	2. Universal Credit is intended to extend conditionality to working people, an approach which has rarely, if ever, been implemented elsewhere. Thus far, the DWP reports that only participants in the Universal Credit In-Work Progression RCT have been subject to conditionality (Couling 2020). All three groups in the trial were exposed to conditionality, sanctions, varying degrees of contact with Work Coaches, and in most cases increased financial incentives to work. The evaluation reported small positive effects on earnings for groups who had moderate and frequent contact with Work Coaches at 52 weeks after random assignment (DWP 2018). Again all groups were subject to conditionality, so it is not possible to identify the effect of sanctions, but a small survey of the RCT respondents reported that ‘there was no evidence of

different outcomes depending on reported experience of sanctions” after 15 months (DWP 2018a).* 1. Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) extended conditionality to lone parents of successively younger children. Lone parents on Universal Credit are required to be available for work after their youngest child reaches the age of 3. The reduction in age of youngest child to 7 years was evaluated using a robust quasi- experimental design. The evaluation found that LPO increased lone parents’ probability of exiting benefits, but they were more likely to move to health-related benefits or to non-claimant unemployment (neither working nor claiming benefit) than they were to move into employment. However, the impact of LPO on employment was considerably larger than that of earlier voluntary interventions for lone parents (Avram et al 2018).
	2. Conditionality has become an increasingly prominent feature of the UK’s active labour market regime in recent years. The New Labour government began to place more emphasis on mandatory employment-related activities backed up by sanctions from around 2005, but the Coalition government oversaw an unprecedented expansion in their reach and severity following the April 2010 implementation of sanctions for failure to attend Jobcentre interviews and the introduction of full benefit sanctions in October 2012. As noted above, sanctions were also applied to previously exempt groups, including lone parents, people with disabilities or health problems, and latterly under Universal Credit, people who are already in work. The use of sanctioning increased dramatically for some years, but has now decreased (Webster 2020).
	3. The theory of change underpinning conditionality and sanctions appears to be that they will
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| encourage people to increase job searching, “to take a wider range of jobs with differing hours”, or to look for more hours and higher pay. This is posited to lead to quicker moves into work or increased hours for in- work claimants (DWP 2016). The DWP frequently cites several international studies as evidence for the efficacy of sanctions (DWP 2019). Two of these show that sanctions increase exits from welfare, but provide no evidence on the employment effects (Lalive et al 2002, Svarer 2007). A further two show that sanctions do increase job finding rates, but this is at the expense of job stability and earnings (Arni et al 2009, Van den Berg and Vikstrom 2009). These studies represent only a small fraction of the available evidence, but to date a comprehensive synthesis of the effects of sanctions per se on labour market or health and other wider outcomes has not been conducted. The lead author of this submission and colleagues are conducting a systematic scoping review of these studies which will provide a much needed overview of the available evidence, but it is clear that many international studies corroborate the findings that sanctions tend to lead to poor quality jobs, lower earnings, and disconnection from both work and welfare. It should be noted that these studies often evaluate less punitive sanctions regimes.* 1. UK studies find no impact of sanctions on employment (Taulbut et al 2018), but increased benefit off-flows and longer spells neither working nor in receipt of benefit (NAO 2016).There is also mounting evidence for negative health impacts of sanctions. The mental health of lone parents declined after the implementation of Lone Parent Obligations (Katikireddi et al 2018), and there is evidence for negative effects of sanctions on depression, anxiety, and anti-depressant prescribing (Williams 2019, Williams 2020). A recent study of Universal Credit found that psychological distress increased following implementation (Wickham et al 2020). Qualitative studies find that sanctions can lead to worsening health, suicide attempts, alcohol abuse, and addiction relapses (Wright et al 2018, Barnes et al 2016, Johnsen 2016), while hindering attempts to find work (Wright & Patrick 2019). These negative impacts were found in a relatively buoyant jobs market. In the context of a major labour market shock, the decision by the DWP to reintroduce work search requirements and sanctions for Universal Credit claimants is extremely concerning, particularly as quantitative evidence on the effects of sanctions is still lacking in the UK. In the post-Covid context, supply-side policies which place the onus on individual jobseekers to find work without regard to labour market demand or individual circumstances are unlikely to be effective.
	2. Conditionality is believed to be necessary because claimants may become dependent on benefits and reduce work search efforts if no conditions are applied. However, a systematic scoping review of studies of unconditional cash transfers found that unconditional payments do not appear to cause large reductions in labour market activity. Reductions were seen in women with young children in countries where maternity pay was not available, and qualitative evidence suggested that where people reduced the amount they worked, it was often to spend time on activities such as caring for people or returning to education. In one intervention that was similar to Universal Credit (but without employment requirements), people reported that the tapered withdrawal of benefits allowed them to remain in work when their circumstances changed, because benefits were not withdrawn immediately if they did a small amount of work (Gibson et al 2020). This flexibility, coupled with the incentive effect of allowing claimants to keep more of their earnings, may explain the positive employment impacts observed in the 2017 study of Universal Credit’s employment impacts. Increased Tax Credits also led to an increase in lone parent employment and improvements in parent and child wellbeing (Gregg and Harkness 2009), suggesting that financial incentives can increase employment without the damaging effects of sanctions.
	3. Despite a long history of evaluations of ALMPs by the DWP, it is difficult to reach conclusions regarding which interventions are most effective. The quality of the studies is extremely variable, and many are limited by the lack of a suitable comparison or control group. Increased use of experimental and quasi- experimental study designs is welcome, but the credibility of these studies is undermined by the failure to publish research protocols prior to the trials commencing, in line with standard reporting guidelines (Chan et al 2013). It is now expected practice to publish full details of a trial’s methods in advance of the trial beginning, to guard against selective reporting. The lack of evidence for the impacts of ALMPs is particularly disappointing given that the UK has an abundance of data available in routinely collected administrative datasets, and the UK government has invested heavily in the infrastructure required to undertake such work safely and securely (ESRC 2018). In particular, evidence on the effects of sanctions in the UK is urgently required. The DWP has made assurances to the Committee that an evaluation of sanctions will shortly be made available (Couling 2020). This seems implausible, as the necessary dataset

has not yet been released to external researchers, although we understand that it will be made available |

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| imminently.*International evidence on the effects of ALMPs** 1. We are aware of a number of reviews and meta-analyses of evidence on ALMPs for the general population in high-income countries. Most of these have methodological limitations, including poor reporting of methods, lack of detail on or non-systematic approaches to study identification and inclusion, and failing to consider the magnitude of any reported effects. Understanding of which interventions are most effective is hampered by the use of very broad categories to describe interventions. Most reviews use a four-part typology of ALMP interventions, including training, private sector job subsidies, public sector job creation, and enhanced services (which may include sanctions). Training, for instance, can encompass a very wide range of possible content, duration and delivery format, and including enhanced services and sanctions in a single category precludes understanding of the effects of conditionality. Many other possible approaches to ALMP are not considered. Most reviews focus on employment outcomes; effects on earnings, income, and job stability are rarely considered. We identified one review which focuses on the health impacts of ALMP.
	2. Findings across the reviews are inconsistent. Those using the most robust methods conclude that overall the effects of ALMP on employment are positive but small, but one finds that programme type has no effects (Filges et al 2015), while the other reports that training and enhanced services have positive impacts, and the effect of subsidised labour in the private and public sectors is negative in the short term, but positive in the longer term (Vooren et al 2018). Wage subsidies, vocational training, enhanced services, and private sector job subsidies are identified as effective interventions by some of the reviews (Yevati et al 2019, Vooren et al 2018, Card 2017, Kluve 2010). Two note differing sub-group effects, with women, the long-term unemployed, and disadvantaged claimants appearing to benefit more from ALMP participation (Card 2017, Crepon and Van den Berg 2016). Effects may also differ over time, with training and subsidised jobs having negative effects in the short term, but positive effects over the longer term (Card 2017, Vooren et al 2018). The review of health impacts found that job search assistance with a psychological component improved mental health (Puig-Barrachina et al 2020). One review notes that employment effects appear to be stronger in recessionary periods, and suggests that training and private sector job subsidies may be effective counter-cyclical interventions (Card 2017). Finally, one other review suggests that the net effects of ALMP may be small (Crepon and Van den Berg 2016), because participants often find jobs at the expense of other workers, an effect found in several large, robust studies (Crepon et al 2013, Gautier et al 2018).
	3. Evidence from the United States indicates that economic conditions and increased tax credits played a greater role in increasing employment for lone parents than time limits and more severe sanctions (Grogger 2003). Tax credits are also associated with improvements in health and many children’s outcomes (Hoynes 2019). A synthesis of findings from 12 large employment assistance programmes indicated that features such as earnings supplements in conjunction with individualised support, close links to employers, and staff with specialist knowledge of local labour markets could have some positive impacts. Generic coaching was not helpful. However, most of the ALMP trialled in these studies had disappointing effects on employment entry, retention, and progression (Hamilton & Scrivener 2012). As a result, more recent US studies have evaluated new approaches to employment assistance. ‘Career pathway’ programmes collaborate strategically with employers and industry to identify sectors with skills shortages which provide good quality jobs and clear progression opportunities. Workers are supported to gain initial qualifications, and then to upskill progressively while in employment. Sectors include the allied health professions, IT, and hi-tech manufacturing. Typically a broad range of in-work supports is also provided, including coaching, childcare and transport expenses, and financial incentives. They do not involve sanctions for non-compliance. Interim findings from several of these studies have shown promising effects on employment, participation in training, and earnings (Kazis 2016).
	4. This is one among many approaches trialled and robustly evaluated in the US. A recent overview of completed and ongoing research identified over 200 completed studies of different approaches and tens more which are currently underway. A comprehensive summary of these is outwith the scope of this evidence submission, but notable successes are associated with earnings supplements, collaborations with industry and employers, and the career pathway approach to facilitating training in sectors with high

demand. Community colleges have become key providers of training in these fields. Several studies |

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| comparing participation requirements found that higher requirements did not produce stronger effects on employment (Fishman et al 2020). The DWP has ongoing relationships with some of the organisations conducting these studies, which represent an opportunity to exploit the body of US evidence and experience on what works to support people in the labour market.*Conclusions** 1. There is an evidence base for active labour market programmes in the UK, including many studies conducted by the DWP. It would be helpful to collate and synthesise the findings of these studies. More recent UK evidence suggests that personalised, flexible support can be helpful, but generic training is not. Universal Credit seems to have had positive employment impacts, but analyses of more recent data are required. Quantitative analyses of the Work Programme and the Work and Health Programme, and of the employment and health impacts of sanctions should also be prioritised. The evidence from reviews of international ALMP studies is inconsistent and provides little information on intervention content. There is a wealth of evidence on different activation strategies from the US. One promising approach involves strategic collaboration with industry to identify high demand sectors and supporting claimants to progressively upskill in these sectors.
	2. Increased work incentives and greater flexibility are positive aspects of Universal Credit. However, the available evidence indicates that conditionality does not lead to sustainable employment and unconditional payments do not cause a collapse in labour market activity. Sanctions have negative effects on health; conversely, earnings supplements lead to increases in employment while improving health outcomes. Cuts to the Work Allowance have undermined the incentive effect of Universal Credit, particularly for single claimants. Given that we are now facing a very severe labour market shock, reversing the Work Allowance cuts and substantially easing conditionality may incentivise employment while also reducing poverty and protecting health.

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| **When was the response submitted?** |
| 10/9/20 |
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