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ARTICLE

Re-examining 'personalised conditionality': full-time obligations, partial adjustments and power asymmetries in the UK's approach to work-related conditionality

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Abstract

Work-related conditionality policy in the UK is built around the problematic assumption that people should commit to 'full-time' work and job search efforts as a condition of receiving benefits. This is potentially in conflict with the idea that what is required of people should be tailored to their circumstances in some way – 'personalised conditionality' – and implies a failure to recognise that conditionality is being applied to a diverse group of people and in a context where the paid work that is available is often temporary and insecure. Drawing on thirty-three qualitative interviews with people subject to intensive work-related conditionality whilst receiving Universal Credit or Jobseeker's Allowance in Manchester, the paper explores the work-related time demands that people were facing and argues that these provide a lens for examining the rigidities and contradictions of conditionality policy. The findings indicate that expectations are often set in relation to an ideal of full-time hours and in a highly asymmetric context that is far from conducive to being able to negotiate a reasonable set of work-related expectations. Work search requirements affect people differently depending on their personal circumstances and demand-side factors, and can act to weaken the position of people entering, or already in, work.

Keywords: Conditionality; Activation; Work; Personalisation; Universal Credit; Welfare reform

Introduction

Activation policies link receipt of benefits to participation in paid work, coupling supportive and more 'demanding' elements (Clasen and Mascaro, 2022). How these elements are reconciled varies across different programmes and country contexts (Clasen and Clegg, 2007; Knotz, 2018). 'Work-first' approaches, such as those pursued in the UK, tend to emphasise job search as a route to moving people into jobs as quickly as possible (Peck and Theodore, 2000). Focussing on the UK context, people who claim Universal Credit, the main means-tested benefit for working-age

people, must sign a Claimant Commitment at the start of their claim that describes the things that they are expected to do each week as a condition of receiving benefits. Those who are judged able to work may have to agree that they will do everything that they can to find work or to earn more, with policy regulations establishing a default benchmark of 35 hours per week for evaluating the efforts of people who are required to look for work (*The Universal Credit Regulations*, 2013, p.95).

Although there is a presumption in favour of 'full-time' work search and work, work-related expectations can be adjusted to take account of people's 'particular capabilities and circumstances' (DWP, 2010, p.27). Policy guidelines hint at these possibilities, but studies of the lived experience of welfare conditionality tend to highlight evidence of a standardised and rigid approach to setting expectations at odds with people's responsibilities and the opportunities available to them (Welfare Conditionality, 2018; Andersen, 2020; Wright and Dwyer, 2022). However, less attention has been paid to the forms of rigidities that are applied, and whether and how any adjustments are made. This is important in understanding both the limits of pursuing a compliance-driven approach to employment support and its implications, and in identifying what could be changed.

This paper provides new empirical evidence of people's experiences of intensive work-related conditionality, as the scope of conditionality policy is set to expand to encompass an even broader range of people on Universal Credit, including a growing number of people who are already in work (see discussion of recent changes to the Administrative Earnings Threshold [AET] below). Drawing on interviews with people subject to intensive work-related requirements in a northern city region in 2022–2023, the paper examines how people attempt to make sense of and respond to expectations relating to participating in job search and work-related requirements. The empirical research was undertaken following the re-introduction of active work search monitoring in 2022 and 2023, following a brief pause during the pandemic. The analytical focus is on the extent to which a standard of full-time work – evident in the policy design – is applied and with what implications. Drawing on Acker's (2006) conceptualisation of the 'ideal worker' and attention to the way that inequalities can be created through the fundamental construction of the working day, this exploratory study indicates that a full-time ideal is being used as a reference point for setting expectations within Universal Credit, with implications particularly for those who do not resemble the ideal of an 'unencumbered worker'.

Availability and work search demands, which are core aspects of work-related conditionality, are effectively demands for people to evidence how much time they will dedicate to different activities. This provides an empirical basis for exploring the extent to which a standardised approach to conditionality is being experienced by people on unemployment-related benefits. The paper examines (1) whether work-related conditionality is being implemented with reference to a 'full-time', standardised set of expectations, and (2) whether and how adjustments to expectations were being made. Finally, it addresses (3) the implications of this approach to work-related conditionality, in the light of policy goals to support people into sustained paid employment. Overall, it explores whether and how people are able to negotiate and respond to work-related conditionality through examination of the demands placed on people who are expected to enter or seek more work. This builds on the literature exploring contradictions in the design of

Universal Credit (Millar and Bennett, 2017; Summers and Young, 2020) as well as to evidence on conditionality mismatches and the counterproductive effects of conditionality policy and employment support (Patrick, 2014; Wright and Dwyer, 2022; Scholz and Ingold, 2021).

The following two sections briefly examine the UK's current approach to work-related conditionality and how this is linked to the idea of personalisation, before identifying how previous studies have examined work-related expectations and evidence of tailoring or personalisation. The methods are then introduced, before key findings are discussed relating to experiences of standardised conditionality, and whether and how adjustments were made. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

(Personalised) work-related conditionality under universal credit

Personalised conditionality refers to the idea that what people are asked to do as a condition of receiving benefits should be adjusted to individual 'circumstances and capabilities' (DWP, 2010). In an influential 2008 policy review, Gregg outlined a vision for a 'single personalised conditionality regime' where everyone claiming benefits should be required to move towards and into work. The 'work ready' would generally face standard job search requirements whilst a broad group of other claimants for whom 'an immediate return to work is not appropriate but is a genuine possibility with time, encouragement and support' would face more tailored requirements (2008, p.8), and a small group of claimants would face no conditionality.

More than 15 years later, what is meant by personalisation remains far from clear, and the policy view around who is work ready has shifted significantly, as have some of the flexibilities on offer (Rafferty and Wiggan, 2017; Dwyer et al., 2023; Single Parent Rights, 2023), yet the outline of this vision of personalised conditionality can be traced in the design of Universal Credit (UC), now the main means-tested benefit for working-age people. People claiming UC are categorised on the basis of an assessment of their current situation, including selective recognition of their earnings, some caring responsibilities and state of health (DWP, 2021). Each regime is associated with different types of work-related expectations and differences in the intensity of monitoring and contact that is required with advisers. This paper focusses on the conditions that apply specifically to people facing the more intensive forms of work-related conditionality rather than those facing 'lighter' forms of conditionality who are not currently expected to seek paid employment.

In the UC policy regulations and guidelines the amount of effort that is required of 'work ready' people is often proxied by their 'expected hours' of work and work search, with the policy designed to promote 'full-time' work as the standard (Couling, cited in Select Committee on Economic Affairs, 2020). Work-related requirements are recorded in a Claimant Commitment, or an online Commitment page and people must agree to these to receive benefit payments. Although it is possible for a person's 'expected hours' to be adjusted or tailored (see Section J3054 in DWP, 2023a), 35 hours of work at the minimum wage is the default expectation. Internal guidelines and some limited rules describe instances where reduced expectations can or should be applied, but the amount of effort that people are

required to evidence is largely left to the discretion of the adviser. To comply with the work-related expectations in their Claimant Commitment, people must either demonstrate that they have spent the required number of hours looking for work or make the case that they have taken all reasonable steps to find work, despite spending less time on these activities (see Section J3064 in DWP, 2023a).

The degree of monitoring against these expectations depends on a person's earnings. If you earn less than the Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET), you are placed in the 'intensive work search' group and face regular monitoring and reporting requirements. This includes a requirement to participate in weekly or fortnightly adviser interviews where further work availability and work search requirements can be set.

Currently, light touch requirements apply to those who earn more than the AET but less than the Conditionality Earnings Threshold (CET) (DWP, 2023c).[1] The latter threshold is set based on working 35 hours at the relevant minimum wage, or a lower amount if a person's 'expected' hours have been reduced. An 'in-work support offer' is also being rolled out to the 'light touch' conditionality group, and although the details remain unclear (Jones, 2022, p.254–5), there are proposals that this would extend some mandatory requirements for people to take steps to increase their earnings. Finally, a further group, assessed as 'working enough', are not subject to work-related requirements on the basis that they are earning above the CET. Broadly then the intensity of work-related conditionality is set with reference to two earnings thresholds that are defined in relation to hours of work on the minimum wage.

The amount that someone would need to earn to avoid intensive work-related conditionality has changed dramatically in recent years. From May 2024, the threshold for determining who experiences intensive work requirements (the AET) increased to the equivalent of working 18 hours per week on the minimum wage for single people, or 29 hours for people in a couple (The Universal Credit (Administrative Earnings Threshold) (Amendment) Regulations, 2024). In 2020, the threshold was equivalent to almost 9 hours of work on the minimum wage for a single person, increasing to 12 hours in 2022 and 15 hours in 2023. The most recent change means that since May 2024 a single person would need to earn £892 per month, or £1437 for those in a couple, before regular monitoring and work search requirements would ease and they be subject to the 'lighter touch' conditionality regime.

The scope for tailoring expectations has always been ambiguous. Guidelines for staff, for example, assert that the requirements should 'be reasonable and achievable and be tailored to the individual claimant, fully taking into account all their circumstances, the local job market and any extenuating circumstances' (see Section J1004 in DWP, 2022a). However, below the rhetoric of reasonable adaptations and specification of different 'regimes', tailoring is left to the constrained discretion of the adviser. There are few explicit guidelines on when and how work-related expectations should be temporarily suspended or reduced by advisers (for instance, for some people who have caring responsibilities [DWP, 2023f], or a health condition [DWP, 2023e]).

Under this one-sided approach to conditionality, claimants are made accountable for taking 'reasonable steps' towards work or increasing their time

in paid work, but there is limited scrutiny of the types and intensity of the expectations that are set. The Department for Work and Pensions does not collect information on the extent to which expectations are being tailored to individual circumstances and for what reasons. Surveys of people subject to conditionality find that many do not view their Claimant Commitment as feasible, achievable or related to their personal circumstances (IFF Research, 2018; see also Talbot, 2024). Following a review of 150 Claimant Commitments linked to people in the 'Intensive Work Search' regime within Universal Credit, the Social Security Advisory Committee found that half contained commitments 'below "standard" full conditionality', including adjustments to reduce work search hours, or how long someone might be expected to travel to work (2019, p.26).[2]

Problems with personalised conditionality

In one of the few papers to focus on the idea of 'personalised conditionality', Grover (2012) identifies several contradictions and tensions underpinning policy discourses relating to conditionality in the UK in the 2000s. Despite a rhetorical commitment to tailoring, he argues there was an emphasis on finding ways to strengthen conditionality (2012, p.290), particularly for those not previously subject to conditionality, rather than on addressing the more difficult question of how an adviser is meant to assess what it might be possible for someone to do to find work. Through a reliance on local negotiations and discretion, personalised conditionality locates the responsibility for agreeing on realistic expectations with the work coach and ultimately the individual jobseeker, while neglecting the power dynamics that are inherent in adviser–claimant conversations. Advisers, for example, can suspend payments for minor infractions that they perceive the claimant to have committed, with limited scope for appeal (Selman, 2022).

The idea of personalised conditionality therefore rests on a series of assumptions which require further empirical investigation. However, despite the attention that has been accorded to work-related conditionality and its impacts, less empirical attention has been paid to 'personalisation in practice' (Toerien et al., 2013), or the process through which work-related expectations are adjusted and how the idea of personalised conditionality is viewed by claimants. Andersen's research on the lived experience of conditionality among mothers of young children raises questions about the adequacy of the adjustments that are made for this group. Although this is one of the few areas where some explicit guidelines are provided to advisers on how work-related conditionality should be adjusted for 'lead carers', she identifies a lack of recognition of mothers' full caring responsibilities, which created conflicts between them meeting work search expectations and undertaking unpaid childcare (2020, p.12).

While there is an extensive street-level literature examining how advisers categorise and manage claimants and how and whether they personalise support, less attention has been paid to the related but distinct idea of personalised conditionality in this strand of the literature. O'Sullivan et al. highlight the potential for advisers to support the re-categorisation of claimants, including in ways that may result in them facing fewer or no work-related requirements (2019, p.638), but their study was undertaken in a context of marketised employment support where

performance management processes potentially created incentives for workers in subcontracted providers to reclassify jobseekers. Less is known about the way that expectations are set within mainstream public employment support services, before any referrals to outsourced provision.

However, the 'street-level' activation literature does furnish explanations for the lack of tailoring of conditions. There is clearly scope for adviser and jobseeker views on what might be considered a realistic set of expectations to diverge (see e.g. Toerien et al., 2013), while institutional factors such as large caseloads and performance management targets can encourage advisers to adopt standardised approaches (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016; Social Security Advisory Committee, 2019, p.26). The mixing of support and compliance monitoring functions within the adviser role can also prevent the development of trusting and supportive relationships which might facilitate a better understanding of personal circumstances (Toerien et al., 2013; Jordan, 2018).

Examining 'personalised' conditionality

This paper explores the disconnect between the policy vision of a tailored approach to conditionality and people's experiences of the application of standardised, inflexible conditions. To do so it focusses on the commitment to promoting full-time work and work-search, which is embedded in the design of unemployment-related benefits in the UK, specifically Universal Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance. It argues that work-related conditionality is being implemented in the shadow of 'full' work search requirements. In developing this argument the paper draws on Acker's (2006) conceptualisation of the way that inequalities are created through the 'fundamental construction of the working day and of work obligations' organised around the image of an 'unencumbered' worker with 'no responsibilities for children or family demands other than earning a living. [Available for] eight hours of continuous work away from the living space, arrival on time, total attention to the work, and long hours if requested.' (2006, p.448). Scholz and Ingold (2021) have extended this conceptualisation to encompass 'potential workers', showing that a previous UK activation programme helped to reproduce disability inequalities for participants with mental health conditions because it persisted in treating them as 'ideal jobseekers' who were able bodied and unencumbered and therefore able to adapt to the requirements of the programme. This paper examines work-related conditionality as a process with the potential to exacerbate inequalities across the diverse group of people constructed as 'work ready' within current conditionality policy in the UK.

Methods

This article draws on qualitative data to explore how people in receipt of benefits understand and attempt to negotiate work-related expectations. The empirical data comprise thirty-three semi-structured interviews with people on Universal Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). The fieldwork was conducted between 2022 and 2023 in Manchester, part of a post-industrial city–region in the north-west of England, allowing for an examination of how people navigate conditionality requirements in

the context of an urban labour market which has historically been associated with higher rates of unemployment and inactivity and concentrations of low pay and atypical forms of work (Overell and Wakeford, 2022; Fitzmaurice et al., 2023).

Participants were recruited purposively across several community settings. This included attending community events, libraries and resource centres and distributing leaflets and briefings about the research to policymakers and practitioners. At the time of the fieldwork, intensive work-related conditionality was being applied to people with low or no earnings who fell into the 'intensive work search' group (i.e. earned less than the AET). Participants were recruited if they reported that they were receiving Universal Credit or JSA and had recent experience in work or of searching for work alongside regular contact with a Jobcentre Plus adviser. This encompassed people both in and out of work provided that they were currently engaging with an adviser.

The interviews covered the experiences and perspectives of people navigating work-related conditionality, rather than work coach or adviser experiences of enforcing conditionality (see Kaufman, 2020; Redman et al., 2022). Assessments of how much and what type of work it would be appropriate or feasible for someone to do may well diverge between advisers and claimants, but accessing advisers would require a level of access to mainstream employment support settings, for example, Jobcentre Plus, that has proved challenging for independent studies of the implementation of conditionality (see also Dwyer et al., 2023, p.162). Closer engagement with administrators and policymakers, for example, through recruiting in Jobcentre Plus offices, could also affect participants' willingness to discuss contrasting views of conditionality and non-compliant responses.

Participants were interviewed individually in community settings wherever possible (e.g. cafes, libraries and resource centres), but eight interviews were conducted online or over the phone at the request of the participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants, with the exception of one interview in which the participant requested that the interview not be recorded and notes were taken instead. Adviser interviews are highly unequal exchanges in which people can be held to account for meeting their work-related requirements. Steps were taken to try to avoid reproducing this dynamic in the research interviews as far as possible. Drawing on the idea that timeline exercises can enable participants to establish parameters around interview discussions (Kolar et al., 2015), participants were initially asked about what a typical day looked like for them. This provided cues around what people were willing to talk about and follow-up questions were developed linking to topics in the interview schedule as appropriate. Core topics included people's work and benefit situation, what they believed their adviser expected them to do in terms of looking for (more) work and whether they were aware of or had requested any adjustments to these expectations. The transcripts were coded and analysed through an iterative reflexive process (Braun et al., 2019) and codes were developed to explore the co-existence of 'rigidities' in the way that conditionality is experienced alongside the potential for adjustments to work-related expectations.

Almost all of those sampled were receiving Universal Credit at the time of the interview, with one person receiving legacy Jobseeker's Allowance, a benefit with similar conditionality requirements. Participants were aged between 25 and

65 years, with nineteen men and fourteen women and a mix of single people, single parents and couples with children. Compared with 2022 Universal Credit caseload data on those subject to 'intensive work search', it is worth noting that relatively few of the participants were under 30 years (10% of participants versus 30% of the Intensive Work Search (IWS) caseload) and a greater share were in employment (21% of participants, 14% of the IWS caseload). While participants were not expected to know what conditionality regime they had been placed in, a third of the sample (eleven) were out of work at the time of the interview and gave an account of what appeared to be standard or 'full' job search expectations, and another five were in work whilst engaging with the jobcentre and looking for work. Work-related expectations appeared to have been applied flexibly, had been reduced or were currently suspended for just under half the sample who were also out of work (fifteen). Finally, two people were working with more minimal contact with their adviser and were attempting to increase their hours or change jobs.

The research project was reviewed and approved by the LSE Research Ethics Committee. Interview transcripts have been pseudonymised to avoid participant identification whilst retaining information about the fieldwork site and wider 'systems of relations' (Nespor, 2000) which shape experiences of work-related conditionality.

Findings

This section examines how rigidities within the current approach to work-related conditionality exist alongside partial adjustments to 'full' expectations and discusses how time obligations can be viewed as an organisational process reinforcing inequalities in the labour market. This process was particularly visible in relation to (1) experiences of standardised expectations and (2) constraining factors in conditionality exchanges that appeared to be preventing adjustments from being made or leading to inadequate adjustments.

Experiences of 'standardised' expectations: 'They expect you to get up and just go: job, job, job, job'

In the absence of being able to report that they had secured a paid role, people discussed how their work search efforts were evaluated in regular adviser meetings in terms of the number of hours spent searching for vacancies, applications submitted, CVs sent out, and interviews secured. The regularity of meetings varied, but among those facing intensive conditionality it was often fortnightly, or even weekly. Tom described how his 'full' work-search expectations had been explained to him:

> Well, basically, what they want is to go in your journal and see you've put in, you've looked for jobs. You're supposed to look, spend X amount of hours, 7 hours a day. And you're like, "Are you for real?" … Nobody does that. Nobody's going to sit down for, call it 35 hours a week, looking for a job [Tom, full/35-hour expectations, UC]

The expectations he faced were for 'full-time' hours of work search, which he would need to evidence by outlining in his journal, and later possibly in a meeting with his advisor, the time he had spent on different sites and the number of applications that he had submitted that week, as well as detailing any responses he had received.

'Standard' expectations for full-time work search and work were not necessarily viewed as unrealistic or inappropriate. Some wanted and needed to enter full-time work (Jane, Rashid, Dan, Ada), but many struggled to consistently meet full work search expectations, particularly where they perceived there to be limited availability of appropriate jobs or they lacked the tools and resources to support their work search. The need to demonstrate compliance with full work search requirements affected people differently depending on their personal situations and wider structural factors. Martin, a white man struggling with anxiety problems, found it relatively straightforward to apply for the ten jobs that were expected of him per week as he was looking for cleaning roles, which were relatively plentiful, and he had only recently started meeting with his adviser to discuss his work search requirements. However, health conditions, caring responsibilities and other factors that narrowed the range and types of jobs that people were able to take on also set limits on the ability of people to submit an application that 'makes sense' (Martin).

Like others, Isaiah struggled to comprehend how to demonstrate compliance with 'full-time' expectations in a context where they had limited access to the internet and computers. This was compounded by the nature of the jobs that were available: the prevalence of temporary roles, low pay and short notice shifts – particularly apparent amongst those applying for or working in the care, warehousing and logistics sectors – also made it more difficult to escape from intensive monitoring of job search and conditionality, since 'lighter' monitoring against the full-time or adjusted requirements came into effect only once people were earning above a set threshold (equivalent to 9–12 hours per week on the minimum wage for a single person at the time of this research). Isaiah, who was in his late fifties, had been out of work for several years and was receiving Jobseeker's Allowance. In recent months he had been told 'the requirement is you have to look for work from 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, which is hard to do' because, as he explained, he did not have access to the internet at home and depended on using his phone and visiting community resource centres and the library near where he lived to search for vacancies online. He was also contending with chronic physical health problems, which both narrowed the range of jobs that he felt able to do and also affected the pace at which he could work.

> You do get responses, and you have to keep turning their jobs, but it's not suitable – the location or the type of job, and if some [advisers] want to be nasty, 'Oh, you are applying for jobs you are not really qualified for'. With my physical condition and my health risk, I can't just apply for any jobs, you know, sometimes it is meaning jobs are difficult, jobs, you know, physically demanding, the part time or zero hours . . . you can't just do it, you know . . . Not everyone is suitable for any type of job, and sometimes these jobs are just, like, zero hours, part time, you know.
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> [Isaiah, full/35-hour expectations, JSA]

There are also costs associated with searching for work which could not easily be covered whilst subsisting on income transfers. Robbie, who was in his fifties, was a qualified HGV driver who had signed up with an agency that recruited for driving roles in an effort to find full-time work. After taking on a few shifts as an agency worker in the previous month he was no longer working after sustaining an injury on a shift, but also received no Universal Credit payment because he had earned too much the previous month. He was left unable to cover basic costs through to the next month and was accessing a food bank and walking to his adviser appointments to save money. This meant he was also unable to take on short-notice shifts or attend interviews unless they were within walking distance because he did not have the funds to cover public transport costs. To access funds for his bus fare to the interview he had to walk to the Jobcentre Plus office to provide evidence that he had an interview:

> I said, 'Look, I've got this interview on Wednesday, I need bus fare'. 'Right, I'll book you an appointment for [Tuesday]'. 'You're leaving it a bit short because it's 2.55pm my appointment', well, she says, 'I can only get you in at 2.55pm tomorrow'. And I said, I just thought to myself, It's 2.55pm, and I've got to, it's got to go into my account . . . so, I can get the bus because I'll be getting the bus at about 9.00am [Wednesday] morning. So, if it doesn't go in tonight, and I can't ring the company to say, 'Look, this is what's happened', you know?
>
> [Robbie, full/35-hour expectations, UC]

While he was keen to move into full-time work and seemed eager to participate in 'full-time' job search, Robbie found that attendance and reporting requirements, combined with insufficient income and a lack of meaningful support, were making it harder to find a good job.

The myth of personalised conditionality: 'I'll probably adjust towards them and kind of work around it'

Work-related expectations were not viewed as something that could be adjusted, or which were subject to negotiation. Instead, Duncan talked about feeling he needed to 'adjust towards' them, by fitting his other commitments around what his adviser was asking him to do and asking for flexibility, if needed, after the fact. He had recently started claiming Universal Credit again after working in a series of stressful call centre roles and had been told that he was expected to spend 35 hours per week looking for work. He had some mixed feelings about the expectations that he faced.

> Obviously you are scared a little bit and there's frightening stories, people having their benefits cut and being kicked out and this and that. I don't feel [pressurised] in any way, shape or form, but then again I've only just started claiming . . . I think, you know, not necessarily they should adjust towards me, but I'll probably adjust towards them and kind of work around it.
>
> [Duncan, full/35-hour work search requirements, UC]

Duncan felt optimistic that he could meet his work search and availability requirements and believed that his efforts would be interpreted sympathetically by his adviser. Rather than trying to reduce the hours of effort that his adviser was asking for to take account of the time he was spending with his mum, who was not well, he took a laptop with him to his mum's house so that he could search for online vacancies at the same time.

This strategy of trying to adjust to, rather than change or negotiate expectations, reflected the limited power that people felt they had, but also a concern that asking for adjustments would mark them out as reluctant jobseekers potentially meriting further scrutiny (see also Wright and Dwyer, 2022, p.8–9). Carl was one exception to this – he described a time when he had been sent by his adviser to interview for a job that would have involved close to a 2-hour commute each way:

> They sent me for one job and it was a wild goose chase because you can agree during your commitment how far you are willing to travel and how long you are supposed to spend on a day travelling. So, I said I'd travel 90 minutes a day which is not unreasonable, 90 minutes a day that's the max . . . Went for the interview and it wasn't the job that they said it was it was working there on sales permanently and I said I- look I'm not prepared to I've thought it's taken me 2 hours to get here what's it going to be like getting here for 9 o clock and then what's it going to be like coming home at rush hour I'm going to be spending 5 or 6 hours travelling I'm not prepared to do that for any job.
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> [Carl, working with additional work search expectations, UC]

Carl approached exchanges with his adviser with caution, viewing each meeting as a chance for the adviser to check up on him. However, as an older man with varied experience of work and of volunteering in advice services and claiming benefits under different regimes, he felt able to push back when his adviser asked him to take up a role that he did not think was a good fit.

Explicit adjustments to hours expectations were made in some instances where lead carers, who were predominantly women, were caring for young children or for those engaging with health professionals. Safia, a woman in her forties, was suffering from anxiety and was feeling low after being laid off from a stressful managerial role at a hotel franchise during the pandemic. She had been claiming Universal Credit for about 6 months and had been issued with a sick note. She was facing work search expectations of around 12 hours a week and was volunteering for 4 hours a week. She believed that her work coach had taken her circumstances into account, but even so she felt worried that she might fall short of their expectations:

> To be honest I don't believe in this 12 hours, 8 hours, how can [they] know what is happening? I think it depends on the individual, and maybe some people do need this . . . I do feel pressure though. I feel it when I think I didn't do anything last week and so what are they going to say? Don't know what they expect from me.
>
> [Safia, adjusted 12-hour expectations, UC]

Some adjustments had been made in light of Safia's anxiety and state of health, but she was still required to meet with her work coach every 2 weeks, even though she found it difficult to leave the house and she was uncertain whether discretion would be exercised in assessing her efforts if things became too much for her.

Although her expectations had been reduced, Ariana, who was currently out of work and facing reduced work search requirements as a single parent with a 9-year-old son, viewed these adjustments as inadequate:

> JobCentre, so they don't check the CV of the person. Gender of the person. Distance between your home to workplace, timetable after child, timetable after work. I use the [bus] by my home to go to work, 6 until 12 o'clock, 6 until 12 o'clock I used to work. My son last year had the stomach problem because of the skipping breakfast . . . So, Job Centre trying just pushing people for job without knowing every individual has a different circumstance in our life, yeah?
>
> [Ariana, migrant single mother, adjusted 25-hour expectation, UC]

Ariana aspired to work in education and had a higher-level degree in child psychiatry but her qualifications, obtained at a foreign university, were not yet recognised by the relevant professional body in the UK. She had recent experience of working in a warehouse but had been unable to sustain this because shifts started early in the morning, preventing her from eating breakfast with her son and dropping him off at school.

Discussion

These findings extend our understanding of the form and rigidity of the work-related requirements that are being applied to people subject to intensive work-related conditionality. Despite the varied circumstances of those subject to this form of conditionality, the common starting position was to expect 'full-time' effort – proxied by '35 hours' of efforts relating to work search and availability – with the potential for temporary reductions or suspensions to these requirements. Conversations about finding work were conducted in the shadow of these full expectations and amid uncertainty about whether efforts would be judged as sufficient. Some people could meet the expectations or had advisers who were willing to interpret their work search efforts sympathetically. Sufficient evidence of job search efforts could also sometimes be secured without the equivalent of full-time job search, particularly where people had access to the internet and were able to quickly fill out several applications or submit CVs in response to online job adverts. However, others were expending considerable efforts to try to adjust themselves to these expectations, or relied on adviser discretion to make partial adjustments.

Adviser meetings were widely interpreted as being about demonstrating quantitative compliance with work search requirements, rather than as supportive interactions. When conditionality exchanges are understood in this way – equated with the policing of time-based obligations – they can act to reproduce gender,

disability and class-based inequalities because the need to secure adjustments to full work-related expectations is unevenly distributed. In a context in which bargaining power is lacking (Greer, 2016), responsibilities are unevenly distributed (Chung and van der Horst, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2022) and the scope for adjustments unclear, the challenge of demonstrating compliance falls particularly heavily on those who diverge from the ideal of an unencumbered worker (Acker, 2006; Scholz and Ingold, 2021).

Recent policy changes indicate a move towards greater standardisation and intensification of conditionality, including measures increasing the hours expectations and therefore the amount of work or work-related effort required of parents with young children (DWP, 2022b, 2023b). The fieldwork was conducted at a time when caseloads remained high relative to pre-pandemic levels, and staff were required to make referrals to some providers in line with local 'profiles' for employment support provision (DWP, 2023d, p.5). However, the finding that expectations were adjusted partially and with reference to an ideal of full-time work speaks to wider evidence of a compliance-focussed system which is experienced as punitive rather than supportive, partly as a result of the imposition of 'standardised' processes and routines (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016; Considine et al., 2020; Wright and Dwyer, 2022; Jordan et al., 2023).

Ultimately, if conditionality continues to be extended and deepened across advanced economies (Knotz, 2018; Economic Affairs Committee, 2020; Dwyer et al., 2023), policymakers need a fuller appreciation of the limits and contradictions of an approach premised on supply side fundamentalism (Jones, 2022) where the support on offer amounts to little more than holding claimants to account for their lack of full-time work. Extending and intensifying work-related conditionality without regard for the resources, capabilities and circumstances of those experiencing it risks the imposition of a problematic 'full-time' worker ideal. Not only does this create further material hardship and insecurity for individuals and their families, but it also has wider costs, as people may fill their time with quantifiable job search activities and feel pressured to take on low quality, unsustainable jobs (Rubery et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2024) rather than seeking a role that is compatible with their capacities and skills.

While the emphasis on 'full-time' effort under Universal Credit appears distinctive, the approach finds echoes in the contradictory 'time accountancy' (Helman, 2021) pursued in other activation settings. Recognition of a right to time (Chung, 2022) for people claiming benefits may be some way off, but this research underscores the limitations of an approach emphasising compliance over meaningful efforts to support people into sustainable and decent jobs (Jordan et al., 2023; Pollard, 2023). The reliance on work coach discretion and voluntary disclosure of potentially sensitive information is especially problematic in the context of a largely unaccountable and inscrutable process. There was little evidence that, in the course of intensive work-search monitoring exchanges, people felt that their advisers had explicitly discussed how their expectations could be reduced to accommodate their circumstances. Conditionality was switched 'off' and 'on' in response to some crisis situations and doctor's notes, and adviser discretion was also potentially exercised in other ways (e.g. through accepting that what people reported doing equated to 35 hours of effort) but there were only four instances where

participants discussed explicit reductions to the hours expectations. People therefore lacked a clear sense of what expectations they faced, how they had been (or could be) adjusted (see also Talbot, 2024, p.46) and what steps they could take to try to secure these changes.

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Notes

1 Work availability relates to a requirement that people are available, able and willing to immediately take up paid work, more work or better paid work, and able and willing to attend job interviews; and work search relates to searching for jobs, making job applications, registering with agencies, obtaining references and creating and maintaining job profiles.

2 The exercise undertaken for the SSAC inquiry did not directly assess how the conditions set out in the Claimant Commitment related to people's responsibilities and circumstances.

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