

CSAN response to the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into the future of Jobcentre Plus

1. CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network) is the domestic social action arm of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Our network includes 44 Catholic charities and dioceses who work with vulnerable people all across England and Wales

2. The response below is a collection of the frontline experiences of the CSAN network. Respondents include: **Brushstrokes, the Cardinal Hume Centre, Caritas Care, Caritas Middlesbrough, Caritas Salford, Nugent Care, Marriage Care, the Passage, St Vincent Depaul (Newcastle-upon-Tyne) and Our Lady of Gillingham Parish.**

3. CSAN welcomes this inquiry. We are pleased to be able to contribute and would be delighted to provide oral evidence to the Committee.

4. Summary of recommendations

Support for vulnerable clients

- To allow charities and professionals to fully support vulnerable clients, there should be an intermediary line for advisors of charities to call on behalf of clients, similar to the one available for HMRC.
- More recognition is needed of the varying abilities of computer skills, literacy, comprehension and language skills of claimants.
- There should be more opportunity for face to face contact with Jobcentre advisors. This would help claimants navigate the complicated procedures, reduce the number of errors and delays and improve relationships between Jobcentre Plus (JCP) staff and claimants.
- The Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) decision to tailor services to permit people in supported accommodation services to be exempt from computerised systems and are able to continue to make telephone claims is welcome. It is important that this continues in the future and that any transition is managed carefully, with greater flexibility to recognise the difficulty these clients will have navigating and adjusting to any new system.

Greater digitalisation support

- Robust 'assessment' process should be in place to screen all clients who are not confident working in a digital environment.
- An action plan should be developed to address learning needs (digital and general literacy) with appropriate timeframes and sign-posting (ensuring capacity of service provider and appropriate level of support).
- An 'interim' plan should be agreed to ensure that vulnerable groups and/or people are not sanctioned or unfairly penalised for their lack of digitalisation awareness/skill.

Tailored and specialised programmes

- JCP's should foster relationships with local community organisations who are already offering tailored and specialised services, rather than attempting to administer programmes themselves.
- Peer-led in-work job clubs should be piloted, building on the experience of organisations such as the Cardinal Hume Centre. These programmes are proven to ease the transition into employment and will have a significant impact on job sustainment rates, especially for the long-term unemployed.

- Many of the people with multiple and complex barriers, such as homeless people, are more than 12 months away from the job market, and the funding structures of employment programmes need to reflect this reality. Therefore, funding should be provided more flexibly to organisations running programmes to support the hardest to help.
- There needs to be greater recognition of the input needed to help people facing multiple disadvantages into work in any future commissioning of contracts. The payment system should be adapted to reflect intermediate outcomes beyond simply counting the number of events (courses and job searches for example) someone has participated in. This could include changes in self-esteem, confidence and communication skills.
- Relationship instability, despite being a key factor in hindering an individual's job sustainment and employment prospects is often overlooked. Sign-posting by JCP's to organisations such as Marriage Care who are able to help families overcome these issues should be encouraged.
- Training should be provided for JCP staff so they can spot the signs of unstable and/or 'at risk' relationships.

JCP cooperation with local charities and organisations

- JCP's should engage more proactively with small, specialist and local organisations who are supporting vulnerable clients. For example, JCP's should be more willing to send staff out to offer satellite clinics in the places where the most marginalised feel safe such as foodbanks, community hubs and churches.
- JCP's should provide free training to staff at local organisations to update them on impending changes and future welfare reform to ensure they are equipped to support their clients.
- JCP's should work more closely with Church and faith based initiatives who are supporting vulnerable and marginalised people.

The likely effects of the planned changes on claimants, including on the quality of services offered to them and the implications in relation to digital inclusion

5. Many clients, especially those with complex or multiple needs, have struggled with the increased digitalisation of the benefit system. The CSAN network anticipate this will only increase with the wider roll out of Universal Credit.

6. Access and availability of computers remains a primary cause for concern for our charities, as many of the most marginalised and vulnerable do not have their own computer access. Instead, they visit the library or a local centres but in these instances demand is already very high.

7. Many marginalised and vulnerable clients are not computer literate, which is usually a symptom of other literacy or language issues and therefore require significant assistance and accompaniment. In the experience of the CSAN network, JCP provides little to no support for clients who are not computer literate and these clients therefore encounter significant problems in completing forms and tasks.

8. Trust and personal relationships, in the experience of the CSAN network, is key for achieving productive engagement from vulnerable clients. As they prefer face to face contact, digitalisation therefore acts as a further barrier in terms of vulnerable clients' engagement with the Jobcentre, risking alienation and unnecessary sanctions.

9. The shift to technology has also depersonalised the process, leaving the most vulnerable claimants with an increased sense of isolation and helplessness when they encounter difficulties completing tasks or engaging with the system. Many clients rely on CSAN charity staff to assist them in completing applications and obtain further information on a variety of decisions. The current procedures often prevent staff at charities from being able fully to support their clients. Clients ask for staff to handle claims for a number of reasons for example, many do not have the temperament to wait for many hours to get through and speak with the DWP about their claim. A dedicated line for charities and staff to speak to JCP or DWP staff would prove effective in reducing unnecessary sanctions, delays or errors for vulnerable clients.

10. People in supported accommodation are at particular risk of being acutely affected by any future digitalisation. Many of these individuals prefer face to face interviews rather than remote access, due to severe anxiety or problems with trust. At **Nugent Care** in Liverpool, for example, their clients in a supported accommodation are currently exempt from applying for Universal Credit and remain claiming JSA/ESA (telephone claims are still being accepted). However, Nugent Care is concerned that once these clients leave the service or if their claim changes they will be required to engage with the new digital system. Almost all of these clients do not have the necessary skills to cope with online forms and will almost certainly encounter problems and difficulties leaving them at risk of sanctions and further alienation.

11. Recommendations

- To allow charities and professionals to fully support vulnerable clients, there should be an intermediary line for advisors of charities to call on behalf of clients, similar to the one available for HMRC.
- More recognition is needed of the varying abilities of computer skills, literacy, comprehension and language skills of claimants.
- There should be more opportunity for face to face contact with Jobcentre advisors. This would help claimants navigate the complicated procedures, reduce the number of errors and delays and improve relationships between JCP staff and claimants.
- The DWP's decision to tailor services to ensure people in supported accommodation services are exempt from computerised systems and are able to continue to make telephone claims is welcome. It is important that this continues in the future and that any transition is managed carefully, with greater flexibility to recognise the difficulty these clients will have navigating and adjusting to any new system.

12. As well as leaving already vulnerable clients further alienated from the system and at risk of sanctions and disengagement, the focus on digitalisation also devalues other job search strategies. In the professional opinion of staff at the **Cardinal Hume Centre** in Westminster, digital job applications do not see a high success rate: estimates vary, "*but as few as 3% and certainly no more than 17% of online applications result in job offers*".

13. Clients are being encouraged to equate finding and applying for a large volume of online job openings with 'good job search behaviour' - when in fact the 'scatter gun' approach and emphasis on quantity rather than quality of applications needs to be discouraged. The emphasis instead should be on quality applications, which ensures the individual tailors their application to the job specification rather than simply meeting a certain number of applications.

14. Clients often report that they get little to no support from the local Jobcentre's when completing forms, or using Universal Job Match.

15. A number of CSAN charities offer support services to help people with computer illiteracy, such as **Caritas Salford's** Cornerstone Day Centre in Moss Side which runs computer access and support five days a week. The **Cardinal Hume Centre** and the **Passage** in Westminster offer intensive, specialised one to one training for clients using their services. The Passage also run specialised monthly workshops on how to use Universal Job Match and plan to introduce a similar workshop on UC when it becomes more prevalent.

16. For many of the Cardinal Hume Centre's clients, the move toward digitalisation by the DWP has been an impetus to gain much needed IT skills, skills that will also be of benefit in other areas of their lives. However, those who had been 'left behind' in acquiring digital skills are often those who have the biggest barriers to achieving digital prowess. This includes clients with no access to computer facilities, with mental or physical challenges or who have a severe lack of confidence around learning and IT in particular. They require more intensive and specialised support to get up to speed and even then, the journey can be painfully slow. To ensure fair access, the DWP must ensure support is in place and a 'flexible' attitude to job search techniques (i.e. continued use of 'manual' job log sheets rather than only the Universal JobMatch tool to log job search activity) is left in place for a further appropriate transition period.

17. If not, this 'disadvantaged' client group is going to be penalised unfairly (sanctions) and further marginalised. There is little or no knowledge of any clients across a range of vulnerable support groups being offered tailored services to support them in acquiring digital skills. The Cardinal Hume Centre also raise concerns that the JCP has not thought to introduce any 'assessment' tool to ensure that they can successfully identify those clients in greatest need of support to acquire digital understanding. Lack of skill in this area does not sit 'neatly' within any one client profile or group but varies considerably and in order to set up the most effective support, with realistic goals and timelines, tailored services need to be linked to a robust assessment tool to ensure that individual client needs are truly understood and met.

18. Recommendations

- Ensure that a robust 'assessment' process is in place to screen all clients who are not confident working in a digital environment
- Develop an action plan to address learning needs (digital and general literacy) with appropriate timeframes and sign-posting (ensuring capacity of service provider and appropriate level of support)
- Agree an 'interim' plan to ensure that vulnerable groups and/or people are not sanctioned or unfairly penalised for their lack of digitalisation awareness/skill.

JCP's capability to provide new, tailored services for particular groups of people, including people with mental health problems

19. In the experience of the CSAN network, JCP's are not equipped or indeed, best placed to offer tailored services for the most vulnerable and hardest to reach. Local organisations are often a key part of the community and have therefore built up long-standing trust and strong relationships with their clients.

20. Without significant time, investment and a person-centred approach focused on individual needs, people with multiple barriers will struggle to find and sustain employment.

This programme of support can only be successfully executed by trained and experienced staff and organisations who already work directly with the people furthest away from the job market.

21. The preferential option for tailored support would therefore be via local organisations rather than JCP's establishing their own schemes and "reinventing the wheel".

22. More support is still needed from JCP's and the DWP for organisations who are working with individuals with multiple barriers, especially in improving job sustainment and the employment prospects for people with a history of homelessness and mental health issues.

23. Many of the people with multiple and complex barriers, such as homeless people, are more than 12 months away from the job market, and the funding structures of employment programmes need to reflect this reality. Finding alternative funding remains a significant barrier as funders do not appreciate the flexible approach which is required to support those with acute needs and chaotic lives.

23. There is also a lack of support and recognition for the need to prepare people to deal with in-work situations, such as difficult supervisors and colleagues. Many of the vulnerable people CSAN's organisations work with have been through trauma or may have been unemployed for a number of years, and are therefore not initially equipped to confront these issues alone. Without sufficient support, these individuals will struggle to sustain employment.

24. To counter this issue, the Cardinal Hume Centre has developed a peer-led in-work job club, which they fund themselves, to provide clients with practical assistance in the first months of work to help job sustainment. The in-work job club supports those the Cardinal Hume Centre have helped into employment with any challenges they may be facing in the workplace. This programme has been remarkably successful in easing the transition into employment and improved job sustainment rates.

25. Supporting interventions that improve adult relationship quality and prevent family breakdown should also be considered and encouraged when developing and sign-posting to tailored support services. Unstable or insecure relationships is a key factor which hinders an individual's engagement with JCP's, employment support programmes and job sustainment. Yet, this is a factor which is consistently overlooked when support programmes for the long-term unemployed are devised or explored.

26. In order to spot the signs of relationship stress, and make a suitable referrals to relationship support organisations, such as **Marriage Care**, JCP staff should be provided with awareness training. Early intervention is vital in addressing relationship issues. This training will ensure any potential relationship problems are spotted early and can therefore be addressed, reducing labour market inactivity and improving job sustainment.

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Opportunities afforded by coordination with other local services, including the NHS and schools

28. Coordination with local services who are already supporting and working with the most vulnerable in the community is vital in ensuring claimant engagement with the system. However, across the CSAN network, the relationships with the local JCP's varies greatly.

29. The **Cardinal Hume Centre** have built up a strong relationship with their local JCP, which has improved outcomes for their clients greatly. An advisor regularly attends their employment services sessions to provide additional support and advice to clients. **The Passage** have a similar experience, with sessional workers from JCP. In these instances, the relationship has been mutually beneficial for JCP advisors and, most importantly the clients themselves.

30. **Caritas Salford** are currently running a pilot with the DWP, which has included two JCP staff attending their Job Club at the Lalley Centre on a regular basis. The hope is that this pilot will reduce the number of unnecessary sanctions for vulnerable people and provide evidence to the DWP on how they can improve their services to suit the needs of vulnerable people.

31. However, there are a number of other charities who have sought relationships with their local JCP to no avail. **Caritas Middlesbrough** are trying to arrange for JCP advisors to offer satellite sessions in the John Paul Centre to encourage greater engagement and prevent unnecessary sanctions. **Caritas Cares** in Preston, **SVP in Newcastle** and **Brushstrokes** in Birmingham have all encountered similar difficulties engaging with their local JCP's.

32. Greater engagement would be particularly beneficial in preventing sanctions, for example if a "red light" should flash up about a specific client who the JCP know is receiving support from a local organisation, the organisation could be alerted and address the problem before the client receives a sanction.

33. JCP's should also recognise the importance of Church and faith based initiatives, who are increasingly acting like the glue in keeping local communities together. Faith based

initiatives are often the first place people turn to when they have no recourse to public funds or have had their access to benefits ceased.

34. Recommendations

- JCP's should engage more proactively with small, specialist and local organisations who are supporting vulnerable clients. For example, JCP's should be more willing to send staff out to offer satellite clinics in places where the most marginalised feel safe such as foodbanks, community hubs and churches.
- JCP's should provide free training to staff at local organisations to update them on impending changes and future welfare reform to ensure they are equipped to support their clients.
- JCP's should work more closely with Church and faith based initiatives who are supporting vulnerable and marginalised people.