

**Barnardo's Scotland – written evidence for Welfare Reform Committee
round table on Benefit Sanctions**

Background

Barnardo's Scotland works with vulnerable children and their families across Scotland. Sanctioning of benefits is a particularly prominent feature of welfare work with service users within our services. Many of our services have raised concerns about the use of benefit sanctions, and the very negative impacts this can have on the individuals they are seeking to support.

In response to this, and the wider welfare reform programme, our services have started to require a much greater amount of support on welfare rights.

There is a particular issue around the support we give young people Bill who have been in the care system. The Children and Young People gives general responsibility for the wellbeing of care leavers under 26 to a wide range of public bodies as 'corporate parents', and specific responsibilities to local authorities to support care leavers under 26 with high levels of need. It is not clear how these responsibilities will interact with an extended system of sanctions as proposed within the Universal Credit system.

Vulnerable young people's experience of benefits sanctions – a snapshot from a Barnardo's Scotland service working with vulnerable young people

We looked at our records from one of our Scottish services, which works with a large number of vulnerable young people in a single local authority area. Monitoring information collected from the first quarter has so far indicated that 19 of 61 service users have experienced sanctioning of their benefits at some level. This equates to 31% of our current service users. However, these figures are a snapshot of the situation in one service in a short space of time, and are therefore for illustrative purposes only. 94% of these sanctioned individuals report having to find emergency food and fuel provisions due to sanctioning. Of this 31% of service users who have experienced sanctioning, Barnardo's Scotland have either sourced or supported 79% to obtain emergency food and fuel provisions. Sanctioning of benefits tends to have a "ripple effect" within our young people in that, long after the sanctioning period ends, our young service users continue to be penalised through rent arrears or domestic debts.

Particular issues with the current benefit sanctions system

Barnardo's believes that the sanctioning of very vulnerable young people is often inappropriate, and made this point repeatedly through the passage of the Westminster welfare reform bill. However, as that bill has passed, our staff have identified some key issues affecting vulnerable young people in the system as it currently operates, which they would like to bring to the attention of the Committee:

1. Addressing the timetable for decisions to be made regarding mandatory reconsiderations

When someone has been sanctioned or had their benefits suspended, they have 28 days since the date that the DWP made a decision to sanction or suspend their benefits to apply in writing for the decision to be reassessed. This process is known as mandatory reconsideration. However, the DWP has no written guidance about the length of time in which a mandatory reconsideration should take place and a claimant notified of such a decision. The resulting delay and uncertainty can cause considerable problems for the claimant who is left in limbo during this period.

2. Information about support after sanction

Vulnerable young people can face a challenging and daunting time trying to secure support when they have been sanctioned or had their benefits suspended. In our experience there is often a lack of knowledge amongst service users about the steps to take after a sanction has been served. Sanctioned individuals are not, in our experience, routinely made aware by the DWP that they can request financial assistance (i.e. hardship payments) nor are they signposted to agencies who could provide advice or support.

3. More clarity around the definition of vulnerable groups when advisors are making sanction decisions

As already highlighted, a relatively high proportion of the vulnerable young people we work with experience sanction or suspension. In our experience the reasons for their sanctions are often related to an inability to carry out an instruction rather than an unwillingness to participate in agreements. Unfortunately, their particular vulnerabilities are not always recognised - while homelessness is discussed within DWP guidance (even if the information does only span 2 pages of an 862 page document), individuals experiencing homelessness are not automatically considered as belonging to a vulnerable group. Sanctioning when homeless is an unnecessary added pressure for the young people we work with when they are at a particularly traumatic point in their lives.

4. Informing young people about sanction Decisions

We have experienced situations where young people we work with are unaware that sanctioning has taken place until they arrive at a bank to discover that no payment has been made. The practice is that people are notified in writing of a sanction decision; however this often arrives much later than the date that the sanction was imposed. In addition the letter which is sent to individuals is not particularly claimant-friendly. The language used within the letter is overly complex, full of jargon and often reads as accusatory. Our service users report that it is difficult to understand what they should do next after receiving this letter. For people who have literacy issues, this procedure is not particularly appropriate.

We are happy to discuss these issues in more detail with the committee.

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