Review of the existing evidence on long-term benefit receipt, barriers to progress and effective strategies to reduce long-term benefit receipt

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CASEreport 176

October 2026

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Editorial note

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Social Mobility Commission for funding this research. They are grateful to the members of the project advisory board for advice and feedback on this review. Members of the Social Mobility Commission Secretariat worked closely with the researchers providing invaluable guidance and helpful comments.

Abstract

This review assesses the existing evidence on long-term benefit receipt, with a particular focus on working-age means-tested benefits. These benefits provide a critical safety net supporting people who are out of work or living in low earnings households. Universal Credit has blurred the boundary between in-work and out-of-work support as it is available to eligible low-income households irrespective of work status. This has expanded the focus from interventions designed to help the unemployed find work, to those which seek to help families achieve financial independence. The review identified a number of key knowledge gaps. Little is known about the prevalence of long-term benefit receipt, on trends over time and on the characteristics of long-term benefit recipients. Drawing on a wider literature on income, poverty and low-pay dynamics, the review highlights how the dynamics of economic disadvantage and structural barriers faced by certain groups are likely to lead to elevated risks of requiring means-tested support over long periods of time. Activation programmes have had limited success in achieving good long-term employment outcomes for participants. In-work progression interventions are still very much under development, and the associated evidence base is weak. However, it has become increasingly clear that the rungs at the bottom of the jobs ladder can't be reached by some and tend to be very weak, leading to exclusion and churn. Aspects of benefit design, labour supply constraints, low education and skill levels and limited access to good jobs need to be overcome to achieve a big enough step up the ladder to reach better quality, more secure jobs with sufficient earnings not to require means-tested support. For some, such an outcome is not viable and means-tested benefits will need to continue to provide critical support in the short-term and the long-term.

Key words: Means-tested benefits; long-term receipt; persistence; activation programmes; in-work progression

JEL codes: I38, I31, I32 J64, J68

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Glossary

Benefit unit – defined according to the administration of social security benefits. Typically comprises a single adult or couple with or without dependent children. A household can contain more than one benefit unit.

Conditionality – ongoing receipt of social security benefits is often dependent on various conditions being met by the claimant. The most common are attending regular appointments with Jobcentre staff and meeting the terms of a claimant commitment which can include undertaking tasks to find a job or increase earnings. Where conditions are not met, sanctions can be applied leading to reductions in payments over set periods of time.

Contributory-based benefits – social security benefits for which eligibility is based on an individual's National Insurance contribution record covering a specified period. In the UK, the two main contribution-based working-age benefits are Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA); now called New Style JSA and New Style ESA.

Gig economy - involves the exchange of labour for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms, on a short-term and payment-by-task basis.

Household work intensity – is a measure of the amount of paid work undertaken by working-age adult household members against potential working time. For example, a household with two working age adults where one is working full-time and the other is not working is said to have a household work intensity of 50%.

Legacy benefits – refer to the six working-age means-tested benefits which Universal Credit replaced. The six legacy benefits are: Income

Support; Housing Benefit; income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; income-related Employment and Support Allowance; Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit.

Means-tested benefits – benefits paid according to an assessment of income, and sometimes financial assets, within a benefit unit against needs, based on the number of adults and dependent children.

Reasonable adjustments – In line with the Equality Act 2010, employers are required to make reasonable adjustments to make sure workers with disabilities, or physical or mental health conditions, are not substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs.

Universal Credit – the main means-tested benefit for working-age adults. Work-first activation programmes – employment programmes for unemployed people which prioritise finding work above other interventions such as education or training.

Work allowance – a Universal Credit claimant can earn up to a set threshold before Universal Credit is reduced if they or their partner is responsible for a dependent child or children or have a limited capability to work due to a health condition or disability. This is called the work allowance. Above this threshold, for every £1 earned from working, Universal Credit payment is reduced by 55p. This is called the taper rate.

Acronyms

ALMPs	Active Labour Market Programmes
CASE	Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ERA	Employment Retention and Advancement
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
FRS	Family Resources Survey
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
NEET	Not in employment, education or training
NAO	National Audit Office
OECD	Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PIP	Personal Independence Payment
RCT	Randomised controlled trial
SMC	Social Mobility Commission
UC	Universal Credit
WCA	Work Capability Assessment

1. Introduction

The Social Mobility Commission (SMC) commissioned researchers in the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) to conduct research to help answer the question: What prevents people who are long-term recipients of welfare from progressing socially and economically? The research includes a literature review and quantitative research providing new estimates on long-term benefit receipt in the UK. The SMC has published findings from the quantitative research and policy recommendations in a final report Breaking free: Prevalence, dynamics, and barriers among long-term benefit recipients. This report contains the literature review which synthesises evidence on what is known about working-age people who are long-term benefit recipients, barriers to progress and effective strategies for improving social and economic progress of this group.

The review covers published evidence on long-term benefit receipt and draws on related topics on long-term socio-economic disadvantage where this can help inform the understanding of long-term benefit receipt. The evidence is drawn from peer-reviewed academic journal articles, reports and papers published by think-tanks and research centres, reports published by governments, government departments and parliamentary bodies and reports published by statistical agencies. It covers quantitative as well as qualitative evidence. The main focus of the review is on literature relating to the UK but it also covers research on similar high-income countries where findings can be related to the key research questions.

The literature review is structured across five main sections:

- Evidence on defining working-age long-term benefit receipt
- Prevalence and characteristics of long-term benefit recipients
- The dynamics of benefit receipt: duration dependence, repeat claims and 'scarring'

- The dynamics of related socio-economic outcomes
- Assessment of the evidence on effective strategies to reduce long-term benefit receipt

2. Evidence on defining long-term benefit receipt

The first stage of the project involved reaching an agreement on a working definition of working-age long-term benefit receipt. The definition would inform the main literature review as well as the quantitative analysis of long-term benefit receipt. A rapid review of the literature was used to help inform this decision.

Evidence on overall benefit receipt, different claimant groups (for example, unemployment benefit or disability-related benefits) and related sub-population groups (for example, the economically inactive, people living in poverty, low paid workers), was reviewed. This evidence informed possible options for: 1) determining which social security benefits should be in scope, 2) deciding on the unit of analysis where benefit recipient is determined at a benefit unit level, 3) how to determine the threshold length of benefit claims to be considered long-term. It also considered constraints related to the operationalisation of the definition for the quantitative research. This section summarises the findings from the review before setting out the agreed working definition of long-term benefit receipt. It synthesises evidence on contemporary academic conventions, government statistical practice, and parliamentary framing.

The classification of "benefit recipient" and the temporal threshold for "long-term" receipt are treated as explicit measurement choices that must be justified by the research objective, the available data, and the policy mechanisms under investigation. The definition will need to support

estimates of prevalence, modelling of trajectories and descriptive analysis of persistence, in the quantitative research.

2.1 Scope: Which social security benefits are relevant?

The first aspect concerns scope. Two coherent approaches recur in the literature. An activation-oriented framing delimits the population to working-age recipients of means-tested social security - principally Universal Credit (UC) and the six legacy income-related benefits UC replaced (income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit, Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit). This is because receipt of means-tested benefits determines conditionality regime, referral pathways to Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs), and the claimant facing administrative processes that shape labour market behaviour for those subject to work-related requirements. This approach also recognises that some claimants with limited capability for work or disability-related entitlements follow different administrative pathways and are not exposed to the same conditionality regime (Wright and Dwyer, 2022; Bennett, Currie and Podoletz, 2026). This framing is appropriate where the objective is to examine sanctioning, claimant behaviour, or the labour-market effects of conditionality. By contrast, a system-wide framing treats the benefit system as a portfolio of cash transfers (means-tested, contributory and universal) and is appropriate where the objective is to study redistribution, income composition, or measurement of household living standards (Hoynes, Joyce and Waters, 2024).

A focus on working-age means-tested benefits can be warranted because these cash transfers are largely designed as temporary safety-net mechanisms, intended to respond to shortfalls in earnings, employment instability and changing household composition and need. Unlike non-means-tested benefits - which are generally paid in recognition of long-term or permanent circumstances, such as the extra costs associated

with disability or caring - means-tested benefits are structured around income replacement, labour-market activation and conditionality, and therefore shape the dynamics of entry, duration and exit most relevant to analyses of long-term reliance. They are also the part of the social security system directly influenced by a range of policy levers such as work-search requirements, sanctions, withdrawal rates (the rate at which benefits are reduced as earnings increase) and earnings disregards, making them central to understanding how social security design can influence progression. By contrast, universal and contribution-based benefits play a more stable, categorical role and are not typically intended to function as transitional support, reinforcing the case for treating means-tested benefits as the primary domain for examining persistent reliance on social safety nets. This focus reflects the benefits through which conditionality regimes, work-related requirements and labour-market support are administered, and therefore captures the systems most relevant to understanding progression barriers. A broader specification can be adopted where disability-related entitlements are of interest, recognising that health and disability are integral to patterns of long-term benefit reliance and the boundary between different benefit types can be blurred.

2.2 Unit of analysis: Who is the recipient?

The second element concerns how entitlement is determined. Although quantitative analyses typically use individuals as the unit of observation, means-tested social security in the UK is assessed at the level of the benefit unit - typically a couple or lone adult together with any dependent children. As a result, administrative and survey sources distinguish between claims, named claimants and benefit units, and these structures shape how individual-level measures of benefit receipt should be interpreted (Fisher and Hussein, 2023). Because need (based on household composition and disability status) and income are assessed jointly at the benefit unit level, an individual's 'receipt' status reflects the circumstances of the unit to which they belong. Where the research question focuses on activation,

sanctioning, claimant behaviour or individual labour-market attachment, claimant-level measures (the named adult(s) on the claim) are appropriate; these should be reported separately and justified by the specific mechanism under study (Wright and Dwyer, 2022; Bennett, Currie and Podoletz, 2026). These considerations lend weight to adopting the individual as the unit of analysis while recognising that entry, exit and claim duration are determined not just by the circumstances and actions of the individual but also by other members of the benefit unit, including changes to the composition of the benefit unit.

2.3 Timeframe: How long is 'long term'?

The third dimension concerns the time period used to define long-term receipt. Across academic and government practice, two main approaches are employed. The first is a continuous-spell definition, in which an individual is often considered a long-term recipient after twelve uninterrupted months on benefits. This reflects conventions established by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for defining long-term unemployment and is widely used because the probability of re-employment declines after one year and the risks of labour-market 'scarring' increase (D'hert, Baert and Lippens, 2026; Card, Kluve and Weber, 2018). The second is a persistence approach, which identifies long-term receipt through repeated or sustained benefit use across multiple years - for example, receipt in three out of four consecutive years. This captures patterns of cycling on and off benefits and aligns with the Department for Work and Pensions' definition of persistent low income (DWP, 2026a) and EU measures of poverty persistence (Sandor, Da Costa and Pisiotis, 2026).

Eligibility thresholds within Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) can also help inform the choice of timeframe. These vary across UK ALMPs, reflecting their different target groups and policy aims. Mainstream

programmes such as the Work Programme (2011-2017) or the Restart Scheme (2021-2024) have typically applied unemployment durations of around six to eighteen months, but some, such as the Work and Health Programme (2017-2024), have used longer thresholds of up to twenty-four months.

There is also a practical consideration likely to influence the chosen timeframe. Administrative data enable precise measurement of continuous spells, while annual panel surveys are better suited to identifying persistence across annual observations (waves) (Fisher and Hussein, 2023; Stevelink et al., 2026).

Taking all these factors into consideration, it was agreed that the core working definition of long-term benefit receipt for the purposes of this research project is being in receipt of means-tested benefits for at least 12 months. This definition helps guide the review of the literature and the assessment of effective strategies to reduce long-term benefit receipt. For the quantitative research, for which annual panel data is analysed, a number of definitions of long-term receipt are adopted including being in receipt of means-tested benefits in two consecutive waves, being in receipt of means-tested benefits in two out of three consecutive waves and being in receipt in three out of four consecutive waves.

3. Prevalence and characteristics of long-term benefit recipients

Long-term receipt of means-tested benefits is best understood as the cumulative outcome of repeated exposure to low income, insecure or intermittent work, indebtedness and administrative uncertainty, a pattern which is documented in longitudinal studies of everyday experiences (Patrick, 2017). Administrative uncertainty, created by reassessments,

sanctions, changes in conditionality and delays in payment, can disrupt income and make it harder for people to move off benefits. Prolonged receipt of means-tested support, particularly in the context of a system of fairly extensive in-work benefits, cannot be reduced simply to short episodes of unemployment (Dwyer et al., 2020). Beyond unemployment explanations, it is better understood as an outcome linked to inadequate and unstable earnings, fluctuating household composition, poor health, caring responsibilities and high fixed costs, particularly housing, which together limit the feasibility of sustained exits from receipt. This broader understanding is reinforced by recent evidence on UK poverty, which shows that long-term reliance on means-tested benefits is concentrated among groups whose personal circumstances and actions interact with structural constraints in ways that restrict their capacity to secure stable, sufficient income (Dwyer et al., 2020). For example, lone parents often face limited flexibility in the hours they can work; disabled people may experience health-related fluctuations that affect both capability to work and earnings; and individuals in larger or low-income households frequently manage complex budgeting decisions in the context of high and inflexible living costs. These factors shape the choices people are able to make, the stability of their labour-market participation and the likelihood of sustained exits from means-tested support. Current analyses highlight the concentration of poverty among lone-parent families, larger households and households containing disabled members, underscoring how personal characteristics, household circumstances and structural pressures combine to influence long-term benefit receipt (JRF, 2024).

Recent UK evidence shows that lone parents and larger families are not only disproportionately reliant on means-tested benefits but also face structural barriers that limit mobility. Employment rates among single mothers in April-June 2026 were around 20 percentage points lower than for mothers in a couple (ONS, 2026), reflecting the challenges of finding suitable work around childcare responsibilities (Clery, Dewar and Edney,

2023). Barriers to moving into work and progressing in work identified by single parents include the upfront cost of formal childcare (paid in arrears to those who qualify for help through UC) and lack of specialist Jobcentre work coaches who understand single parents' complex situations (Clery, Dewar and Edney, 2023). Larger families are similarly disadvantaged, with policies such as the two-child limit (subsequently removed in April 2026) and the benefit cap intensifying hardship and making sustained progression out of means-tested support less likely (Stewart, Patrick and Reeves, 2025; Patrick et al., 2023). Expenditure on benefits for these groups therefore reflects systemic constraints: restrictive policy design and limited access to opportunity entrench disadvantage across generations, positioning family composition itself as a critical determinant of progression.

Qualitative studies of long-term benefit receipt in the UK consistently highlight the demographic and social profile of recipients, reinforcing patterns observed in survey data. Research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) found that claimants with caring responsibilities and health conditions faced particular challenges in managing claims (Shaw, Barber and Davies, 2025). As the authors note, "participants also reported issues with being able to apply online or over the phone due to their caring responsibilities… especially when managing claims for their household where family members were unable to help due to health conditions or disabilities" (pp.39–40). Similarly, "participants with physical and mental health conditions had a particularly negative emotional response to the Migration Notice [the formal letter informing legacy benefit claimants that they must move to Universal Credit (UC) within a specified timeframe]. They were anxious about the move to UC and did not want to go through the process" (pp.34–35). Household composition and employment commitments also shaped experiences, with "Housing Benefit and Income Support customers who often had caring responsibilities and/or were in employment finding it difficult to attend appointments" (p.41). Similarly, qualitative work has found that "larger households and families

with disabled members were over-represented among those experiencing persistent poverty and long-term reliance on means-tested support" (JRF, 2024, p.22). These accounts underline that prolonged receipt is concentrated among groups facing multiple disadvantages, and that the defining characteristics of long-term recipients include persistent low income, unstable employment histories, larger household size, disability and caring responsibilities.

There is also an important intergenerational context with evidence of the intergenerational transmission of poverty risks (Bucelli and McKnight, 2024). The SMC's State of the Nation (2023) intergenerational income mobility dataset demonstrates a strong link between parents' and children's incomes, indicating limited mobility for families experiencing sustained low income. They report declining absolute income mobility: 67% for children born in 1987 earned more than their parents by age 30, compared with over 75% in the late 1970s. Relative income mobility remains low too, with intergenerational income elasticity estimates of 0.27–0.29 since the mid-2000s, indicating a strong link between parents' and children's incomes.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's UK Poverty 2023 report similarly finds that children growing up in households with long-term benefit receipt face elevated risks of poverty and constrained earnings later in life (JRF, 2023). However, evidence suggests that intergenerational patterns of benefit use arise from persistent structural disadvantage rather than any "culture of worklessness" or "dependency culture" (Bucelli and McKnight, 2024). Studies exploring social norms around benefit dependency, work and family life have found that young people growing up in workless families hold conventional values about work, often motivated by the experience to try and do better in their own lives (Shildrick et al., 2012).

Macmillan (2014) finds that patterns of intergenerational worklessness are driven by local labour market conditions; only occurring in high unemployment labour markets. Gregg and Macmillan (2020) study of intergenerational joblessness in 15 European countries (including the UK) found that multiple disadvantage creates persistence of deprivation across generations (a combination of living in a jobless household in late childhood, low education and weak labour markets). Rather than finding evidence of a 'dependency culture', they found that greater expenditure on education and more generous welfare systems were associated with lower intergenerational persistence in joblessness across countries.

Patterns of intergenerational disadvantage have been shown to vary markedly across the UK because the interaction between household characteristics and local structural conditions differs by place (Beatty and Fothergill, 2020; Sissons, Green and Lee, 2018). In former industrial regions and parts of the North of England and the Midlands, the long-term effects of de-industrialisation, lower job density and a concentration of lower-paid, insecure work mean that households already facing constraints - such as lone parents or disabled adults - have fewer opportunities to secure stable earnings. Longitudinal research demonstrates that these local labour-market conditions amplify the impact of personal circumstances, making repeated returns to means-tested support more likely (Beatty and Fothergill, 2021). In coastal towns and some rural areas, limited transport infrastructure, seasonal employment and reduced access to childcare and specialist services further restrict the capacity of individuals to convert personal effort into sustained labour-market participation. These constraints are particularly acute for disabled people and carers, whose ability to take up or maintain work is shaped by the availability of local services and the accessibility of employment (Edmiston et al., 2021). By contrast, in parts of London and the South, high housing costs mean that even full-time work may not provide a route off benefit receipt, especially for larger households or those with caring responsibilities (Judge and

McCurdy, 2022). Taken together, these geographical differences show that long-term reliance on means-tested benefits reflects not only household characteristics but also the place-specific opportunities, risks and constraints that shape how personal actions translate into income security. Persistent poverty and extended benefit receipt therefore emerge from the interaction between individual circumstances and the wider economic, housing and service environments in which people live.

While many people move on and off benefits relatively quickly, a significant minority remain on benefits for extended periods. A recent DWP commissioned study of long-term UC recipients (claiming for at least 12 months) who had made a claim for UC in August/September 2019, found that three-quarters were still receiving UC a year and a half after their initial claim (40% of these claimants were in work), with many reporting insecure work histories and barriers to progression (Tu et al., 2024). Persistence in benefit receipt points to the role of structural features of the welfare system - such as conditionality, assessment processes, adequacy of payments and lack of awareness of work incentives (such as the childcare offer) - in shaping trajectories of reliance. Recent survey evidence demonstrates that conditionality is pervasive and often perceived as unreasonable, with over a quarter of claimants reporting that work coaches fail to take health or care-related barriers into account (Baumberg Geiger et al., 2025). Such experiences can prolong uncertainty and discourage transitions into work.

At the same time, broader analyses of the UK welfare state highlight how austerity and retrenchment have reduced the protective capacity of benefits, leaving households exposed to high housing costs and insecure labour markets (Pearce and Kelly, 2025). The adequacy of payments relative to living costs is critical and even employment does not guarantee exit from reliance, particularly in regions with high rents. Scholars argue that these institutional constraints combine with demographic pressures -

such as ageing populations and rising ill-health - to entrench long-term reliance (Adam and Güçeri, 2025).

In a major study, commissioned by DWP, of legacy benefit claimants transitioning to Universal Credit, long-term claimants were found to be disproportionately lone parents, households with disabled members, and those engaged in insecure or low-paid work (Shaw, Barber and Davies, 2025). Participants consistently emphasised that caring responsibilities and health conditions not only increased the likelihood of sustained receipt but also compounded the administrative and financial challenges of managing claims.

Beyond these characteristics, recent research shows that claimants' aspirations, perceptions and actions are highly relevant. Research commissioned by DWP looking at work aspirations and support needs of health and disability customers found that many expressed strong aims to work or re-enter employment, but their ability to act on such aims was constrained by health conditions, caring responsibilities and fear of losing benefit entitlement if work attempts failed (Steen et al., 2025). This demonstrates that persistence on benefits is not simply passive dependence but reflects active attempts to reconcile personal goals with structural barriers. Claimants' perceptions of the system - such as whether UC supports progression or creates administrative hurdles - also shaped their engagement with training and job search.

The existing evidence also finds clear variations across sex, ethnicity and age. Women, particularly lone mothers, are more likely to experience extended receipt due to the intersection of caring responsibilities and limited access to secure, flexible and well-paid work (Steen et al., 2025). Ethnic minority households face disproportionate risks of persistent poverty and long-term benefit reliance, often linked to labour-market discrimination, concentration of employment in insecure sectors, and

higher housing costs in urban areas (JRF, 2024). Age matters too: younger claimants have been found to frequently cycle between insecure jobs and benefits, while older claimants with health conditions or limited qualifications face barriers to re-entry into stable employment (Steen et al., 2025).

Wright and Dwyer (2022), drawing on 141 longitudinal qualitative interviews with UC claimants, argue that in-work conditionality is "largely counterproductive" and produces a "new coerced worker-claimant model of social support" (p.20). Their analysis highlights how many low-paid workers remain entitled to UC while in employment, and that conditionality can intensify instability for those whose earnings and hours fluctuate. Rather than describing a simple transition from benefits to secure employment, their findings highlight how long-term receipt frequently reflects concurrent low pay and benefit entitlement, together with payment volatility and administratively generated insecurity. In short, existing evidence finds that the prevalence of long-term receipt is concentrated in identifiable groups - lone parents, larger households, households with disabled members and those in precarious work - and qualitative evidence highlights how the interaction of low earnings, health and caring responsibilities with programme rules shapes the lived experience of prolonged reliance.

4. The dynamics of benefit receipt: duration dependence, repeat claims and 'scarring effects'

Patterns of benefit receipt increasingly highlight the dynamic nature of long-term reliance, with research showing that extended spells are shaped not only by who enters the system, but by what happens to them over time. Analyses of benefit trajectories explores evidence of state dependence and duration dependence. State dependence exists where claiming benefits in the past is associated with a higher likelihood of being in receipt of benefits.

Duration dependence is where the probability of leaving benefit receipt declines the longer the claim continues. Here it is important to distinguish between 'genuine dependence' and 'spurious dependence'. In relation to duration dependence, observed correlations between the length of benefit claims and declining probabilities of claims ending can be a combination of these two types. Genuine duration dependence occurs where the lengthening of the benefit claim causes the likelihood of the claim ending to decrease. This can occur through, for example, skill depreciation, recruiting behaviour of employers or deterioration in physical or mental health, leading to a reduction in finding and securing work. In contrast, spurious duration dependence is where some individuals are just more likely to be in receipt of benefits over long periods of time. This may be due to ill-health, low skills, labour supply constraints or limited employment opportunities in the local labour market. Immeroll, Jenkins and Königs (2015) find evidence of genuine state dependence in social assistance benefit claims across six countries (Great Britain, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden). Evidence for Norway finds duration dependence in social assistance and "scarring effects" among working-age adults, as well as "occurrence dependence" whereby previous spells on benefits increase the likelihood of returning to benefits in the future (Bhuller, Brinch and Königs, 2017). Vella, Richiardi and van de Ven (2024) estimate significant state dependence in UK means-tested benefit take-up, even after controlling for initial conditions and unobserved differences between individuals, indicating past claiming behaviour affecting current take-up.

Such findings highlight that alongside long continuous spells, many claimants experience repeat claims, cycling in and out of entitlement as earnings fluctuate or short-term jobs end. Longitudinal evidence highlights that repeated transitions between low-paid work and benefits are common, producing instability that is obscured by point-in-time estimates (McKnight et al., 2016). This instability is reinforced by scarring effects, where prior

periods of unemployment or ill-health reduce future employment prospects and increase the likelihood of returning to benefits. Analyses of labour-market trajectories show that repeated exposure to insecure work and benefit receipt leads to cumulative disadvantage, with scarring effects particularly pronounced among older workers and those with health conditions (Lietzmann and Hohmeyer, 2022).

Moving into work or increasing hours of work are the most common routes out of poverty, but that many such exits are fragile; job loss, relationship breakdown or health shocks frequently precipitate returns to benefits and low income (Brewer et al., (2019). For some groups, especially those with long-term health conditions or caring responsibilities (including childcare), exits from benefits are rare or short-lived, and "churning" between low-paid work and means-tested benefits becomes the dominant pattern.

Recent work on poverty dynamics and labour-market transitions has shifted attention from exit alone to the durability and quality of exits from means-tested benefits. Official income-dynamics statistics indicate that movements into and out of low income continue in both directions, but also show that earnings, employment intensity and benefit income remain closely intertwined in shaping those transitions (DWP, 2026a). This finding resonates with broader analyses of post-pandemic living standards, which argue that improvements in income for some low-income households were partly sustained by temporary or targeted policy measures such as the one-off cost-of-living payments and the government's energy rebate scheme, rather than by a durable strengthening of market incomes (Cribb et al., 2024, p.27).

Leaving benefit receipt, then, does not necessarily entail leaving poverty, since households exiting means-tested support often continue to face low and unstable earnings. Re-entry to benefits, likewise, frequently reflects the volatility of insecure work rather than a failed transition. The design of

UC makes this relationship especially visible. Unlike the legacy system - where claimants moved between out-of-work benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) or Income Support (IS) to in-work support through Working Tax Credit (WTC) - UC provides a single, continuous entitlement with award values reassessed monthly. This integrated design has reshaped perceptions of benefit transitions. Under the legacy system, moving into work was often experienced as a discrete "exit" from out-of-work benefits, even if entitlement to means-tested support continued through Working Tax Credit or Housing Benefit.

By contrast, UC blurs the boundary between being "on" and "off" benefits, since entitlement persists into employment where household earnings remain insufficient to meet needs. In April 2026, 37.7% of UC claimants were in employment (DWP, 2026b). This continuity alters how claimants understand their own trajectories: rather than viewing benefit receipt as a temporary interruption, many perceive UC as an ongoing backdrop to low-paid work and household budgeting (Patrick, 2017; Bennett and Millar, 2022). For policymakers, this shift in perception is significant. It highlights that transitions are no longer simply about movement between 'welfare and work', but about navigating overlapping conditions of poverty and entitlement. In this sense, UC has redefined the meaning of "exits" and "returns," making visible the structural insecurities of the labour market and embedding benefit receipt as a routine feature of working life (Baumberg Geiger et al., 2025). The question is therefore not simply whether households are in work or receiving benefits, but whether employment is sufficiently stable and adequately remunerated to make reliance on UC temporary rather than constant or recurrent.

4.1 Disability and benefit dynamics

The rise in economic inactivity associated with long-term health conditions and disability in the post-pandemic period has substantially reframed

discussion of sustained receipt of means-tested benefits. The government estimates that 2.8 million people are economically inactive due to health conditions, 800,000 more than in 2019, with projections showing another 600,000 by 2030 without decisive action (Keep Britain Working: Final Report, 2026). Many of those who are economically inactive experience multiple and overlapping conditions, with particularly high rates of anxiety and depression alongside physical impairments, though it is important to recognise that disability also encompasses long-standing sensory, cognitive and mobility impairments that are not illnesses (ONS, 2023). Administrative data on incapacity benefits show that the number of working-age people in receipt of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or UC on health grounds rose from 2.6 million in 2019/20 to 3.3 million in 2023/24 (DWP, 2025).

In relation to social mobility, the SMC's State of the Nation Report (2023) highlights that disabled adults experience weaker occupational mobility across socio economic backgrounds. For example, disabled adults experience greater downward mobility: among those from higher professional origins, only 16.5% of disabled adults achieved higher professional jobs, compared with 34.7% of non-disabled adults. They are also less likely to be upwardly mobile: 52.1% of disabled adults from lower working class origins are employed in routine and manual occupations, compared with 20.6% of non-disabled adults. Disabled adults are also more likely to be downwardly mobile from intermediate origins into lower working class occupations. With ill health and disability rates increasing in the working age population, these figures show that this is not just an economic concern in terms of greater expenditure on disability-related benefits but a growing problem for future social mobility

The literature illustrates that prolonged reliance on means-tested support among this group cannot be explained by health status or impairment alone. Rather, health-related limitations and disability intersect with low

qualifications, precarious work histories, insecure housing and limited access to treatment or support, producing a compound risk of sustained benefit receipt (Bambra et al., 2020). Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Health Foundation shows that recent increases in economic inactivity have been concentrated among groups already characterised by low earnings and insecure employment. Studies also highlight that health shocks and disability-related barriers frequently occur within households that are already financially constrained, where limited savings, unstable working hours and high fixed costs reduce the capacity to absorb periods of sickness, reduced labour-market participation or fluctuating work capacity (Ray-Chaudhuri et al., 2023; Tinson, Major and Finch, 2022). Long-term receipt of means-tested benefits does not arise solely because recovery from illness is slow; for many individuals, recovery may be partial, uncertain or not possible, and for others disability may be stable but incompatible with the demands of available work. Return-to-work pathways are often poorly aligned with the realities of chronic, fluctuating or lifelong impairments, as well as the social patterning of ill-health. Existing evidence also shows that rising health- and disability-related economic inactivity is both a driver and a consequence of long-term benefit receipt: health limitations and disability reduce the probability of exiting benefits, while prolonged low income and insecurity can exacerbate physical and mental health conditions, creating a feedback loop (Marmot et al., 2020).

Despite concern about long-term reliance, it is important to recognise that means-tested in-work benefits play a constructive role for people with limited work capacity or low earnings potential, whether due to disability, long-term health conditions or both. Under UC, as under earlier in-work benefit schemes such as Working Tax Credits, support is explicitly designed to "top up" low earnings and to ensure that individuals who cannot sustain full-time or continuous employment can maintain a degree of labour-market participation through benefit awards that adjust to fluctuating hours and earnings. In this respect, long-term benefit receipt among people with

chronic, fluctuating or disability-related limitations should not be interpreted as evidence of failed transitions, but rather as an indication that the system offers a degree of income stability for those whose health or impairment limits the stability or intensity of their labour-market participation.

Qualitative research adds a human dimension to the statistical patterns described above, but these studies typically draw on small, purposively selected samples and therefore illuminate processes rather than provide population-wide estimates. Research on long-term sick and disabled claimants - such as Garthwaite's (2014) ethnographic study of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessments - documents a common trajectory among claimants who described "pushing through" ill health in low-paid jobs before eventually withdrawing from the labour market and entering prolonged cycles of assessment, reassessment and appeal. Although based on a specific group, these accounts consistently highlight how the stress, uncertainty and adversarial nature of the assessment process can worsen existing conditions, thereby reducing the likelihood of returning to work and reinforcing long-term benefit reliance.

The role of local labour-market conditions and housing costs in shaping the dynamics of benefit receipt is also explored in the literature. Areas with weak labour demand, high rents and limited childcare provision are characterised by higher rates of long-term benefit receipt and lower rates of sustained exits, even after controlling for individual characteristics (Beatty and Fothergill, 2020). There is also evidence that "geographic variation in labour-market conditions influences the propensity to claim disability-related benefits that are conditional on not working" (Roberts and Taylor, 2022, p.1). Roberts and Taylor argue that in places with persistently weak labour demand, individuals with health problems are more likely to leave employment because the local labour market offers fewer

opportunities for flexible, lower-intensity or health-compatible work. Their analysis indicates that these conditions are associated with higher rates of disability-related benefit receipt at the area level, reflecting the structural pressures that shape claimants' trajectories. This evidence underscores that long-term reliance can be shaped less by individual preference than by the interaction of structural opportunity and benefit design.

Disability-related benefits in the UK encompass a range of programmes that serve different purposes, with only some requiring an assessment of work capability through the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). While this design can create incentives for some people with disabilities to withdraw from the labour market, the relationship is more complex than a simple causal pathway. Incapacity benefits may provide a more stable and predictable income, whereas attempting insecure or health-incompatible jobs can expose claimants to continued monitoring, sanctions or the risk of losing entitlement. Yet, fluctuating health, local labour-market conditions, employer flexibility and the availability of supportive arrangements can all have an influence. These interacting factors mean that withdrawal is not an inevitable outcome, but one possible response within a constrained set of options. Analyses show that the WCA's medicalised criteria overlook social and labour-market constraints, reinforcing exclusion where suitable jobs are scarce (Irvine and Haggar, 2024). Policy evaluations further highlight that repeated reassessments and contested appeals generate uncertainty, can discourage claimants from pursuing fragile employment pathways (Kennedy et al., 2023). In this way, assessment rules and conditionality can institutionalise labour-market exit as a rational choice for health-limited workers, embedding dependence as a structural outcome rather than a voluntary one.

4.2 'Scarring effects' of being NEET

The literature on young people classified as NEET (not in employment, education or training) provides some evidence on "scarring effects" which

can include increasing the risk of later "benefit dependence". Analyses of the 1970 British Cohort Study and other longitudinal datasets tracking younger cohorts show that time spent NEET between ages 16 and 24 can have long-term consequences for employment, income and health (Sullivan et al., 2023). Schoon and Bynner (2019) report that, even after adjusting for a wide range of childhood socioeconomic, educational and health factors, individuals who were persistently NEET between ages 16 and 24 remained substantially more likely to experience adverse midlife outcomes. Persistently NEET individuals were approximately three times more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive at age 42, twice as likely to report low income, and over twice as likely to report poor general health. These results reflect conditional associations, not causal effects, but they highlight a strong link between prolonged NEET spells and later disadvantage. The Milburn Review interim report highlights that health and disability are increasingly important drivers of NEET status, with mental health problems particularly prominent (Milburn, 2026, p.17). It further notes that the prevalence of disability among NEETs has risen markedly compared to a decade earlier (p.18), reinforcing long-term scarring risks identified in cohort studies.

In addition, even relatively short NEET spells (2-3 years) are associated with elevated - but not deterministic - risks of later worklessness and financial hardship. Evidence from the 1970 British Cohort Study shows that individuals with NEET spells of two to three years between ages 16 and 24 faced around 30–50% higher risks of unemployment and low income in midlife (Sullivan et al., 2023). Crucially, these risks represent probabilities rather than certainties: many young people with short NEET experiences do subsequently establish stable employment. More recent analyses of the same cohort, extending outcomes to age 51, finds the longer the time spent NEET, the greater the likelihood of later disadvantage - while also highlighting variation, with some individuals overcoming early detachment to achieve secure work (Pelikh, Parsons and Crawford, 2026).

Qualitative research with NEET young adult early UC claimants reinforces this picture. Studies report narratives of "drifting" between short-term jobs, informal work and benefits, with repeated sanctions, unstable housing and poor mental health making it difficult to sustain employment (MacDonald, Shildrick and Furlong, 2020). Many describe feeling "written off" by employers and services and see benefits as both a lifeline and a marker of exclusion. These accounts suggest that the scarring effects of NEET status can extend beyond economic to psychological and social factors, shaping expectations and confidence in ways that increase the likelihood of prolonged benefit receipt.

5. The dynamics of related socio-economic outcomes

Recent evidence shows that persistent low income remains concentrated among working-age households facing multiple and overlapping disadvantages, while changes in earnings and household work intensity continue to shape movement into and out of low income (DWP, 2026a).

The DWP's Income Dynamics series shows that a sizeable group of working-age adults experience persistent low income - being below 60% of median income in at least three out of four consecutive years. Lone parents and disabled adults are found to be consistently over-represented among those in persistent low income (DWP, 2026a). Recent analyses by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) finds rising levels of "very deep" and persistent poverty in the 2010s and early 2020s, with households in very deep poverty often reliant on a combination of Universal Credit, legacy means-tested benefits and disability-related payments (JRF, 2020/21; 2023).

Using longitudinal data from Understanding Society, Hills (2015) shows that many households move above and below the poverty line over a four-year

window, reflecting high degree of income volatility among low-income households in the UK. Yet, a persistent minority remain poor throughout, typically characterised by sustained benefit reliance, weak attachment to the labour market, and exposure to multiple socio-economic risks. These groups disproportionately include lone parents, disabled adults, and individuals with long-term limiting health conditions, whose employment trajectories are often marked by periods of economic inactivity, unstable part-time work, or repeated movement between low-paid jobs and out-of-work benefits. Hills' analysis highlights that persistent poverty is strongly associated with low pay and insecure employment, where earnings remain insufficient to lift households above the poverty threshold even when work is present. It also shows that disability and poor health significantly increase the likelihood of remaining in low income across multiple years, reflecting both reduced work capacity and the cumulative disadvantages associated with chronic illness. This evidence demonstrates that persistent poverty is not simply a matter of individual circumstances at a single point in time, but the outcome of interacting structural constraints - including labour-market insecurity, high housing costs, and health-related barriers - that limit households' ability to achieve sustained economic stability.

DWP commissioned research on work aspirations and support needs of health and disability customers highlights both barriers to work and the specific conditions that can enable participation when health permits. 60% of study participants were worried that DWP would make them look for work that was not suitable for them, and 50% were worried they would not get their benefits back if they tried paid employment and it did not work out (Steen et al., 2025; p.43). It illustrates how fluctuating health conditions, insecure low-paid jobs, and stress associated with benefit conditionality can destabilise already fragile employment trajectories. By contrast, an appointee speaking on behalf of a claimant with long-term health conditions described how flexible arrangements could support re-entry: "If there was a job where she could work from home and the work

was flexible so [she] could work around her bad days then she would be able to work. But she doesn't know what job would offer that" (p.48). Such accounts highlight how benefit reliance among disabled adults is not simply a matter of individual choice, but reflects the interaction of economic inactivity, low pay, disability and poverty, while also pointing to the importance of supportive job design and policy flexibility.

This pattern is echoed in other qualitative and policy evidence. Griffiths and Cain's (2022) study of UC deductions shows how reduced monthly awards intensify insecurity, making it harder for claimants to sustain employment while remaining on means-tested support. Parliamentary evidence on benefit adequacy points in the same direction, finding that erosion in the real value of working-age support sharpens pressure to accept poor-quality jobs (Work and Pensions Committee, 2024). Together, these findings underline that the reversibility of exits is not incidental: it reflects structural conditions in which low-paid work, debt repayment and fluctuating benefit awards coexist, producing precarious rather than definitive departures from means-tested support.

This evidence highlights how the dynamics of low-income and poverty underly the need for longer-term benefit support, with receipt not simply acting as a brief bridge between jobs but part of longer-term income support for an economically disadvantaged group with limited prospects of progressing out of low income. In addition, aspects of the benefit system have been found to harden and raise structural barriers and exacerbate insecurities for some of the most disadvantaged in a ways which are perceived to increase risks associated with finding work.

6. Assessment of the evidence on effective strategies to reduce long-term means-tested benefit receipt

The main challenge with reviewing and assessing the evidence on effective strategies to reduce long-term means-tested benefit receipt is that there isn't a clearly defined intervention targeted at this claimant group. This adds a layer of complexity and means that the review needs to cover evidence from a number of policy areas focused on different aspects likely to drive long-term means-tested benefit receipt.

As discussed earlier, eligibility for means-tested benefits is based on assessment of need at the benefit-unit level, against income from other sources. This means that for people who don't live alone, the reasons why they can be in receipt of means-tested benefits over long periods of time extend beyond their personal circumstances to the circumstances of the people they live with. An assessment of effective strategies to reduce long-term means-tested benefit receipt needs to recognise that individual and household level elements drive long-term receipt.

The main policy interventions designed to reduce benefit receipt among working-age claimants are employment policies, mainly active labour market programmes, designed to help unemployed or economically inactive people find work. While such policies can be important for helping households attain financial independence from means-tested benefits, they don't guarantee that such an outcome will be achieved even where activation policies are found to be effective at reducing unemployment benefit receipt and improving employment outcomes. This is because such interventions are targeted at individuals and rarely is the household context taken into consideration in the design of these policies. In general, evaluations have not considered the issue of in-work means-tested benefits focusing instead on measuring the success of interventions in terms of moving claimants off unemployment benefits and into work. Some

evaluations have looked at longer-term outcomes such as employment retention, time off out-of-work benefits and earnings growth, and this information is relevant to our research question even if the precise outcome of interest is not measured.

An area of policy which can provide some evidence on effective approaches to reducing long-term means-tested benefit receipt, is poverty reduction. This is because poverty is generally assessed at the household level and poverty reduction strategies include a combination of individual-level and household-level targeted policies. As both workless and working households are at risk of poverty, this policy area relates well to the research question of interest and some effective poverty reduction strategies are likely to be effective at reducing long-term means-tested benefit receipt. For working-age households, such strategies typically include policies designed to increase household work intensity, and earnings, but also policies to increase benefit take-up and the adequacy of means-tested benefits where they are not sufficient to raise household income above the poverty line.

Taking these factors into consideration and findings from the literature review reported above, three main policy areas were chosen for this assessment. These are: (1) activation programmes designed to move unemployed or economically inactive benefit claimants into work; (2) approaches to reducing in-work poverty, including in-work progression initiatives; (3) policies to improve employment outcomes for people with health conditions and disabilities. The first covers classical activation programmes designed to help unemployed or economically inactive benefit claimants find work. They are generally based on an employment policy model which pre-dates the rise of means-tested in-work benefits and concerns about long-term receipt of these benefits. The outcomes evaluated include the rate at which out-of-work claimants leave benefits and find work, the duration of unemployment claims, and longer-term

outcomes such as employment retention, time off benefits and labour market earnings. The second spans the wider household context and policies aimed at reducing in-work poverty which have the potential to inform effective strategies to reduce means-tested benefit receipt among working households. These include interventions designed to improve progression in work, particularly among low earners. The third looks specifically at strategies and interventions designed to improve employment outcomes for means-tested benefit claimants with health conditions and disabilities. As highlighted above, increasing prevalence of ill-health and disability in the working-age population and increasing expenditure on disability-related benefits means that there is a growing policy interest in this group who face relatively high risks of being long-term benefit recipients.

6.1 Evaluation of activation programmes

A range of different types of activation exist. An instructive way to classify them is through the typology of activation measures devised by Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl (2008) distinguishing between two sides of activation labelled as "demanding" and "enabling" interventions (Table 1). While policy evaluations tend to focus on single interventions, a mix of demanding and enabling forms of activation tend to co-exist in national activation programmes. The balance between the two may be important, as may rules on who qualifies for different forms of activation.

Table 1: A typology of two sides of activation

Demanding	Enabling
Duration and level of benefits ➢ Lowering benefit generosity ➢ Reducing maximum benefit duration	"Classical" active labour market policies ➢ Job search assistance and counselling ➢ Job-related training schemes ➢ Start-up grants ➢ Subsidised employment

	➢ Mobility grants
Stricter availability criteria and sanctioning clauses ➢ More restrictive definition of suitable job offers ➢ Punitive sanctions for non-compliance	Fiscal incentives/make work pay ➢ Earnings disregard clauses ➢ Wage supplements granted in the case of taking up low-paid jobs ("in-work benefits")
Individual activity requirements ➢ Integration contracts ➢ Monitoring of individual job search effort ➢ Mandatory participation in active labour market policy schemes	Social services ➢ Case management, personalised support ➢ Psychological and social assistance ➢ Childcare support etc.

Adapted from a typology devised by Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl (2008)

There is an extensive literature evaluating the effectiveness of Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs). In an evidence review for the European Commission on the strength of the link between income support and activation, we identified over 400 evaluations of activation policies a decade ago (McKnight and Vaganey, 2016). A number of high-quality meta-level reviews cover a large number of evaluations (Levy Yeyati et al., 2025; Shiferaw, Dolfin and Streke, 2024; Bratu et al., 2014; Card, Kluve and Weber, 2010; Kluve, 2010) and provide a strong basis for assessing effectiveness. Evaluations cover a range of interventions including job search assistance, training programmes, subsidised employment, monitoring benefit claims and sanctions. However, for each type of activation policy a range of impact estimates are found in the literature ranging from positive and statistically significant effects, or insignificant effects through to statistically significant negative effects. Further inspection to try to make sense of what appear to be contradictory and confusing findings reveals that the use of different outcome measures, different evaluation methodologies, different context, whether outcomes are measured in the short, medium or long term, and whether or not programme "lock-in" effects (which occurs where participation in longer

programmes limit jobseekers capacity to find work during this time) are taken into account, help to explain the range of impact estimates (McKnight and Vaganey, 2016). In addition, even within activation types results are often not comparable due to differences in programme design and the characteristics of individuals eligible to participate. However, some clear conclusions emerge across four main types of activation.

6.1.1 Monitoring claimants' activities, 'threat-effects' and sanctions

The evaluation evidence suggests that these demanding forms of activation can increase exits from unemployment in the short-term but there remains concern about the quality of jobs that claimants can be pressurised to accept and limited evidence of the impact on longer-term outcomes. Although these demanding forms of activation have often been grouped together in meta-level analyses, impacts can vary between different types. The threat of approaching compulsory activation can galvanise jobseekers' efforts to find work, such as more intensive job search, applying for more jobs, being prepared to drop reservation wages (van den Berg et al., 2009). Such 'threat effects' have been found to increase exits from unemployment in the short term (Rosholm and Svarer, 2008; Geerdsen, 2006) but some evidence suggests that this is due to jobseekers accepting lower quality jobs (Cockx and Dejemeppe, 2007). DWP has estimated that increasing benefit conditionality among lone parents increased employment outcomes (DWP, 2024) but there is no information on the quality of these outcomes or whether lone parents continued to claim Universal Credit. Bratu et al., (2014) in their meta-level review, conclude that there is a weak evidence base on counselling and monitoring and identify this as a knowledge gap. Now quite dated evidence for the UK on the Restart programme (from a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) which took place in 1989) found that greater monitoring of efforts made by unemployment benefit claimants to find work alongside some job search assistance led to lower rates of unemployment five years after participation for men (Dolton and O'Neill, 2002). The authors conclude that the threat component associated with

being called for an interview may account for the short-run effects on exiting unemployment, found in an earlier evaluation (Dolton and O'Neill, 1996).

International evidence on sanctions has found that they can lead to increases in exits from unemployment but the effect is often short-lived, some of the exits are into economic inactivity, earnings and hours worked are lower, and the length of the first job is shorter (van den Berg, Uhlenderf and Woolf, 2017; NAO, 2016; Arni, Lalive and van Ours, 2013; Abbring et al., 2005; Lalive, van Ours, and Zweimuller, 2005; van den Berg, van der Klaauw, and van Ours, 2004). The Public Law Project points out that Universal Credit sanctions can exceed some of the most serious court fines but can be issued for fairly minor failures to meet conditions such as not attending an appointment with a Work Coach (Selman, 2022). Qualitative research has highlighted how sanctions can trigger evictions, lead to financial instability and debt, increase food and fuel poverty, damage mental health and emotional wellbeing, undermine claimant relationships with Work Coaches and overall trust in the social security system, and diminish the ability to seek or retain work (Selman, 2022; Wright, Johnsen and Scullion, 2018). The National Audit Office (NAO) believes that DWP does not do enough to track the costs and benefits of benefit sanctions, where possible costs should include the negative impact on sanctioned claimants' financial hardship and poor mental health and knock-on increases in public spending required to support sanctioned claimants (NAO, 2016).

DWP recently assessed the impact of sanctioning UC claimants on employment outcomes and found that sanctioned claimants exit less quickly into PAYE earnings and earn less upon exiting UC (DWP, 2023). While DWP recognise the poorer outcomes for sanctioned claimants, they justify the sanctioning regime "to incentivise compliance with a conditionality regime that encourages work search and earnings increases".

However, the regime affects a large number of claimants and the negative impact of sanctions is likely to increase expenditure on means-tested benefits in the longer-term (with more time out of work and lower earnings when in work). In February 2026, more than 1 in 20 UC claimants in conditionality regimes were undergoing a sanction (around 113,400 claimants), highlighting the scale of the issue and bringing into question whether sanctions are working. The NAO has urged DWP to do more to estimate the size of any deterrent effect arising from the sanctioning regime (NAO, 2016). This would allow for a more open debate on the costs and benefits of sanctions and whether an alternative approach could be more effective. From a long-term means-tested benefit receipt perspective, it would be helpful to understand if sanctioning increases the likelihood of long-term receipt as the evaluation evidence suggests that this is a real possibility.

6.1.2 Subsidised employment

This can take the form of financial incentives made available to employers who recruit unemployed jobseekers (sometimes targeted at specific groups such as long-term unemployed or young people). They are intended to help jobseekers gain work experience and reduce the financial risks for employers willing to take on unemployed people. They can include reductions in payroll taxes or social insurance, or cover the salary costs of participants for a limited period of time. Programmes include work experience placements and work trials where unemployed people continue to receive benefits rather than being paid by the employer. Evaluation evidence shows that subsidised private sector employment schemes are more likely to lead to positive employment outcomes than public sector initiatives which have largely been found to be ineffective (Card, Kluve and Weber, 2010; Kluve, 2010). Unusually, Levy Yeyati et al. (2025), in their meta-analysis of RCTs, find positive employment effects for public works programmes (although their evidence covers low- and middle-income

countries as well as high income countries and evidence on public works programmes is grouped with wage subsidies).

While not typically grouped with this form of activation, in-work benefits are a form of subsidised employment. These benefits are not only designed to help reduce in-work poverty (covered in the next section), but a key objective is also to "make work pay" for individuals with low earnings potential and particularly those living in households with relatively high living costs (housing costs, supporting dependent children and childcare costs). From the employer's perspective, in-work benefits increase labour supply typically among low skilled workers. This allows employers to create and sustain low paid work opportunities which are effectively subsidised through the in-work benefit system. Statutory minimum wages become particularly important for creating a wage floor as there is a risk that wages will be driven very low.

Despite positive evaluation evidence there are concerns that widespread subsidised employment can allow firms to keep wages low, limit wage growth, and result in unintended consequences such as facilitating the growth of poor-quality jobs at the expense of good-quality jobs. While there isn't evaluation evidence to underpin this concern, sluggish earnings growth, proliferation of poor-quality jobs and increasing expenditure on in-work benefit in the UK suggests that this might be worth looking into further.

6.1.3 Job search assistance

This form of activation generally involves job search training and sometimes job brokering, help with CV writing and job applications as well as interview preparation. It is one of the most widely used enabling forms of activation due to its relatively low cost. It is generally available to all types of claimants including young people, long-term unemployed and some economically inactive claimants, although the level of support can

vary and be tailored to different groups. It is often combined with monitoring benefit conditionality and claimant activity. There is evidence that it can improve the quality of job matches (Crépon, Dejemeppe and Gurgand, 2005). Card, Kluve and Weber (2010) in their meta-level review of around 200 programmes, conclude that job search assistance (grouped with threats and sanctions in their classification scheme) is one of the main interventions most likely to have a positive impact on exiting unemployment. Other evidence has found mixed evaluation evidence and some find that standard 'employment services' have a negligible impact on employment outcomes (Bratu et al., 2014).

6.1.3 Training

Training programmes within ALMPs are designed to increase skills and productivity to improve chances of finding work, remaining in work and increasing earnings. A wide variety of training programmes exist which vary in length and quality. Training tends to be the most costly form of ALMP but costs can be shared with employers. Care needs to be taken to ensure that these programmes don't displace employer-provided training. Early impact evaluation evidence, particularly from the US, which compared a classroom-based training programme with a work-first programme (where the sole emphasis is on moving jobseekers as quickly as possible into work) led to the impression that work-first programmes were more effective at returning unemployed benefit recipients to work (Freedman et al., 2000; Riccio et al., 1994). However, improvements in evaluation methodology, factoring in "lock-in effects" and assessing longer-term outcomes led to many studies reversing this conclusion, particularly for on-the-job training programmes (Osikominu, 2021; Bratu et al., 2014) and especially those offering work- and work-based learning in conjunction with employment services such as work readiness training or employment coaching (Shiferaw, Dolfin and Streke, 2024). Longer training programmes have been found to be effective at increasing the duration of subsequent employment spells (Lechner et al., 2011; Crepon et al., 2007) but even

short training programmes have been found to reduce the risk of returning to unemployment in the future (Baião, Guedes and Martins, 2024). This is consistent with the view that enabling forms of activation help improve job matches, the quality of employment outcomes and sustainable work outcomes. Training programmes can be particularly important for people who have been out of work for long periods of time but there are trade-offs in relation to lower cost forms of activation and the longer lock-in effects which can lead to lower rates of employment in the short-term (Osikominu, 2021).

Rather than describing the approach of UK activation as 'Work First', DWP describes it as an 'ABC' approach: Any job, then a Better job, then a Career. Others have suggested that it is more accurate to describe it as a "Work First, Work More" approach (Jones, 2022). The Work and Pensions Committee has raised concerns about this approach being flawed because, as they see it, it "doesn't work for claimants, exacerbating cycles of low work, no work; nor does it work for employers, who receive unmotivated candidates applying just to meet benefit conditions." (Work and Pensions Committee, 2025, p.1). The Committee recommends allowing claimants longer to find a 'good job' to avoid the low-pay/no-pay cycle. Interventions which are effective at improving longer-term employment outcomes (increasing employment retention, reducing low-pay/no-pay cycles and improving earnings growth) are likely to be the most effective at reducing long-term means-tested benefit receipt but there is no evaluation evidence which looks specifically at this issue.

Although training provision is currently less than during some periods in the past, elements of training are incorporated into UK activation programmes. Currently, only short programmes are available such as Sector-based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs). Available in England and Scotland, placements under this programme are voluntary, can last up to six weeks and include sector specific pre-employment training, work

experience placements and a guaranteed job interview. The programme combines a short period of training with subsidised employment as participants continue to receive benefits while in the programme and travel and childcare costs are covered. Other training courses available to jobseekers include Skills Bootcamps (also available to people in work). These free courses, which last for up to 16 weeks and are available to adults aged 19 and over living in England, allow participants to develop sector-specific skills and should guarantee an interview at the end of the course. They are designed to address skill shortages in priority sectors. Evaluation evidence which would allow comparisons with other ALMPs in terms of employment outcomes are currently not available for either programme.

6.2 Reducing in-work poverty through progression

The focus on in-work poverty brings to the fore the issue of in-work means-tested benefits and the need to escape in-work poverty to move off these benefits. While the two don't precisely align, policies aimed at reducing risks of in-work poverty are likely to also be effective at reducing in-work means-tested benefit receipt. Previous reviews have identified a number of key policies to reduce the incidence of in-work poverty (see, for example, McKnight et al., 2016). These include:

- policies to improve household earnings either through increasing the number of hours worked by working age adults in a household (household work intensity), achieving higher rates of employee pay or income from self-employment;
- increasing take-up rates and adequacy of in-work benefits, where they fall short of the in-work poverty line, and improving the design of tax and in-work benefit systems;
- longer-term strategies to increase the financial resilience of households.

This assessment focuses on policies to improve household earnings through in-work progression. While adequate in-work benefits, benefit take-up and

household financial resilience can all help reduce the immediate impacts of low income, increasing earnings through higher pay, more hours or progression into better jobs offers the clearest route out of eligibility for means-tested support and therefore the most direct pathway to reducing long-term benefit receipt.

Rising in-work poverty and the importance of progression

In 2023/24 12% of working age adults in the UK were estimated to be living in in-work poverty, up from 10% in 2000/01, affecting 3.8 million workers (JRF, 2026). In addition, one in four working-age adults in poor workless households who found work moved into in-work poverty (Hick and Lanau, 2018). Increasing in-work poverty rates and the expansion of in-work means-tested benefits in the UK, have led to a growing policy interest in how to improve in-work progression. Low levels of progression are believed to explain the prevalence of in-work poverty and reliance on means-tested benefits (Blundell, 2022).

Working Tax Credits, which were phased-out from 2018 and replaced by UC, had a minimum working hours rule (16 hours a week) and were not available to adults aged under 25 without dependent children. In contrast, there is no minimum working hours rule to be eligible for UC which is designed to be seamlessly paid as claimants move between working and non-working states and as working hours fluctuate, with just the value of monthly awards adjusting. The advantage being a reduction in administrative barriers to entering work and changing working hours.

Universal Credit in-work conditionality

A potential risk of the removal of a minimum working hours rule was that people could take-up a series of micro-jobs (with very short, often fluctuating, working hours such as those available in the 'gig economy') and avoid the type of work search benefit conditionality faced by

consistently unemployed claimants. To address this risk, 'in-work conditionality' was introduced requiring:

- out of work UC claimants in low earning working households to search for work;
- working UC claimants to search for more work or higher paid work if they live in a household with low work intensity and earnings below pre-determined threshold;
- all claimants in households with earnings below pre-determined thresholds to attend regular meetings with work coaches and demonstrate progression efforts.

These thresholds, calculated for individual claimants and households, effectively create minimum hours rules as they are based on age relevant statutory minimum wage rates but tailored to account for caring responsibilities and earnings of other adults in the household. For example, the threshold for a single adult without any caring responsibilities is based on working 35 hours a week at the minimum wage.

Low pay and limited progression

While it is important not to confuse low pay and in-work poverty, low pay contributes to in-work poverty risks and features of the low-wage labour market help explain some of the barriers to in-work progression and exits from in-work benefits.

Low-wage employment has been a stubborn feature of the UK labour market with high rates of low-paid work relative to other similar high-income countries (McKnight et al., 2016). For example, in 2019 the proportion of full-time employees with low earnings (less than two-thirds of median earnings) was 19%, well above the 15% OECD average (Cominetti et al., 2022). Recent increases in statutory minimum wage rates, including the introduction of the more generous National Living Wage in 2016, have led to a marked reduction in low pay, as conventionally

measured (Cominetti and McCurdy, 2025). However, a long-standing problem of limited progression from low-paid jobs, including minimum wage jobs, and evidence of 'low wage careers' where a sizeable group of individuals cycle between periods of low-pay and no-pay, or remain in low paid jobs for long periods of time (McKnight, 2002), long-term scarring effects of low-pay, similar to those associated with unemployment (Stewart, 2007), and limited upward mobility (D'Arcy and Finch, 2017), mean that it is necessary to look beyond who is low paid at a point in time. Job polarisation, characterised by a hollowing-out of the occupational distribution and a falling share of 'mid-skilled' jobs has occurred in most OECD countries (OECD, 2020), leading to fewer opportunities for progression. In addition, the increasing number of graduates has meant greater competition for intermediate skilled jobs and limiting opportunities for progression among lower educated workers (Bucelli and McKnight, 2016). Blundell (2022) highlights very poor wage progression across the lifecycle for lower- and middle-educated workers and for those working part-time.

The reasons why progression from low-paying jobs is limited are complex with many people facing multiple barriers to progression. These include lacking sufficient in-demand skills to secure higher paying jobs, labour supply constraints (such as caring responsibilities, poor transport), barriers to accessing enabling forms of active labour market programmes, low quality of part-time jobs, structure of jobs and job quality (including limited career ladders), limited access to good careers advice, lack of confidence, and financial disincentives related to the design of the tax and benefit system (McKnight et al., 2016; Bucelli and McKnight, 2022; Hofman et al., 2024).

Policy response to improving in-work progression

Developing an effective strategy to improve in-work progression requires an understanding of the interplay of potential barriers to progression (Webb

et al., 2018). There is some promising evidence for sector specific workforce development initiatives. To date these have usually been run by intermediaries or non-profit organisations, and the evaluation evidence is largely based on small scale pilots in the US (Hofman et al., 2024; Bucelli and McKnight, 2022). Working with both employers and workers is seen as a central element to these initiatives but inherent tensions between employers and intermediaries seeking to help employees have been identified (Schaberg, 2017). Part of the success of these initiatives appears to be due to how they typically seek to address multiple barriers to progression, the provision of employer provided training and personalised coaching to support career advancement.

With a growing recognition that UK activation programmes need to focus not just on moving jobseekers into work as quickly as possible but also on employment retention and progression, DWP has contributed to this evidence base through a number of trials and pilots. The Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) pilots (2003-2005) combined financial incentives for participants to stay in work and increase working hours, with in-work training, childcare assistance and one-to-one advice and support, thereby addressing a number of the barriers to progression identified in the literature. Positive effects were found during the programme period but results were mixed over the longer-term and effects were found to fade once financial support was withdrawn (Hendra et al., 2011). In the national In-Work Progression RCT (2015-2018) the aim was to test different levels of support and conditionality to in-work means-tested benefit recipients to help inform the UC In-Work Conditionality policy. Evaluation of the trials found a small impact on earnings progression (Langdon et al., 2018; DWP, 2018).

In 2020, DWP set up an In-Work Progression Commission to look at how low paid workers can be better supported to progress in work, with a particular interest in the people DWP comes into contact within its

Jobcentres. The Commission identified three key barriers to progression: 1) Skills; 2) Logistical/Structural; 3) Internal drivers including confidence/risk appetite (DWP, 2021). It concluded that Jobcentres didn't have an adequate in-work progression support offer and identified a need for investment in specialist expertise in progression (DWP, 2021). Subsequently, DWP commissioned a rapid assessment of the international evidence on in-work progression to investigate policies and approaches in other high-income countries (Hofman et al., 2024). The assessment found limited international evidence in this policy area. This is likely to be due to policymakers not identifying in-work progression as an area which requires intervention. Hofman et al. (2024) found the most extensive and strongest evidence was for education and training interventions and career coaching or counselling. They found no evidence to review on wage floors which met their review protocol and either limited evidence on, or were not able to isolate the impact of, employment legislation and reducing labour supply constraints.

DWP has begun to evaluate Jobcentres' in-work progression support provided to UC claimants subject to in-work conditionality, to identify successful elements and areas requiring improvement (Finlay et al., 2026). Support can include skill assessments, developing action plans, providing information on skills development or skills 'bootcamps', referral to the National Careers Service, help with CV writing and advice on job-search. Claimants in the mandatory regime are required to attend fortnightly 10-minute meetings with Work Coaches where effort and progress is monitored and further assistance can be provided. The Work and Pensions Select Committee have raised concerns about how short these meetings are and the limited amount of assistance that can be provided in this time beyond monitoring claimants' efforts and assessing whether they are meeting required conditionality commitments (Work and Pensions Committee, 2025). The Committee is supportive of DWP's plans to integrate Jobcentres and the National Careers Service to create a 'jobs and careers service' but

note that progress has been slow and stress the importance of the need for a change in culture and not simply an administrative change.

Training once again does appear to hold the key. For example, Blundell (2022) finds that returns to work-related training are sizeable and training has a significant impact on wage progression but rates of on-the-job training for lower-educated workers are low.

6.3 Policies to improve employment outcomes for disabled people

In this section particular attention is given to reviewing evidence on activation programmes aimed at increasing employment outcomes among disabled people. This is a group marked by low employment rates and greater reliance on social security. Until fairly recently, many were excluded from UK ALMPs and interventions failed to address the distinct barriers that many disabled people face. However, increasing disability rates in the working age population and growing social security expenditure on this group means that a review of the evidence for this group is important.

There is a substantial and persistent disability employment gap in the UK. In 2025, 52.8% of disabled people versus 83.5% of people not classed as disabled, based on the Equality Act definition, were in employment (DWP, 2026c). The disability employment gap had narrowed in the years leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic but the gap widened over the pandemic and progress has stalled since then (DWP, 2026c). Disabled people in 2024 were nearly twice as likely as non-disabled people to be unemployed (6.9% versus 3.6%) and nearly three times as likely to be economically inactive (43.0% versus 15.3%) (DWP, 2026c). In addition, between 2014 and 2024 disabled workers were twice as likely to move out of work than non-disabled people (10.1% versus 4.6%) and much less likely than non-disabled people to move into work (7.6% versus 28.3%) (DWP, 2026c).

These rates and trends are against a backdrop of increasing disability prevalence. Official statistics show that in 2024/25 24% of working age

adults were classed as disabled (DWP, 2026c). The greatest increases in prevalence between 2013/14 and 2024/25 are among people reporting mental health conditions or "other health problems and disabilities" (DWP, 2026c). An ageing population coupled with increases to the State Pension Age has led to an older working-age population. These factors contribute to the broader trends as poor health and disability prevalence increase with age, reducing capacity to work, and are coupled with additional challenges with keeping older disabled adults in work.

Multiple barriers have been identified in every aspect of employment for people with disabilities: recruitment, job applications, interviews, hiring, training opportunities, career progression and employment retention (Croft, Olsen and Blackmore, 2025). Systemic discrimination (meaning that barriers to work arise more from barriers in society than from people with impairments), inadequate training, false stereotypes of disabled people being less productive, inadequacies and inconsistent application of 'reasonable adjustment', all contribute towards these barriers to employment (Croft, Olsen and Blackmore, 2025).

DWP estimate that around one in five working-age disabled people in 2023/24 had been out of employment for over 10 years and that 37.9% were claiming a sickness or disability benefit, with a further 20% claiming another type of benefit (DWP, 2026c). In 2023, 10% of working-age people were receiving disability or health-related benefits, up from 7.9% in 2019 (Ray-Chaudhuri and Waters, 2024).

Increasing disability prevalence in the working age population, low rates of employment and high rates of reliance on social security among this group is reflected in the growing cost of health-related social security. This cost increased from 1.1% of GDP in 2007/08 to 1.8% in 2024/25 (Work and Pensions Committee, July 2025). However, non-health-related social security expenditure for the working-age population fell from 4% of GDP in

2009/10 to 2.6% in 2023/24. Meaning that overall working-age social security spending as a % of GDP is largely unchanged since 2007 (Work and Pensions Committee, July 2025). Importantly, while there is some evidence that cuts to non-health related benefits have led to increases in disability-related benefit receipt this only explains a relatively small share of the total increase in disability-related benefit expenditure between 2010 and 2019 (Cribb et al., 2025).

Activation programmes targeted at improving employment outcomes for people with health conditions and disabilities have expanded since the mid-1990s. They vary in terms of who is eligible, whether participation is voluntary or mandatory and the range of support available. Programmes have included the New Deal for Disabled People (2001-2011), Pathways to Work (2003-2011), Choices (2006-2011), the Work Programme (2011-2017), and the Work and Health Programme (2017-2024). After referrals to the Work and Health Programme ended in September 2024, the main form of activation currently available is through Work Coaches in Jobcentres. In addition, financial support to reduce certain barriers to work (particularly the cost of aids and support workers) is available through Access to Work and specialist advice and support through Connect to Work (in England and Wales). Alongside these programmes, social security for people with health conditions or disabilities has undergone major reform over the last few decades. In general, reforms have led to a shift away from benefits considered to be 'passive' to 'active' benefits where eligibility is conditional on work search efforts for claimants deemed to have some capacity for work, determined by assessments of work capabilities (Baumberg Geiger, 2017).

Unconditional support has continued to be made available to people assessed to have no prospect of working due to the limiting nature of their conditions, although eligibility for this support has become more restricted. Other reforms have been a clearer definition between benefits designed to

contribute towards the extra costs of disability, which are not means-tested and paid irrespective of work status, and means-tested benefits. This is seen in the current distinction between Personal Independence Payments (PIPs) and the health element of UC.

One aspect which has been looked at in the literature is the impact of expanding benefit conditionality on people with mental health impairments (Dwyer et al., 2020). Findings from qualitative longitudinal interviews with benefit recipients

Despite the range of activation support available and trialled, the evidence base on which to assess the effectiveness of interventions designed to improve employment outcomes for this group is weak. It has proved hard to compare different interventions, with some assessments concluding that impacts are modest but evaluation evidence is limited (Corden and Thorton, 2002). Differences in both in-work and out-of-work benefit systems, and labour market barriers to work make it difficult to compare activation programmes across countries. A recent review of ALMPs in advanced welfare states for people with disabilities in receipt of income-related benefits concluded that no advanced welfare state provided a policy mix that results in long-term employment success for this group of claimants (Lahey et al., 2019). A key challenge is the heterogeneity in this group of claimants in terms of health and disability conditions, the fluctuating nature of many conditions and the range of different barriers which need to be overcome. Success of interventions is dependent on the extent of discrimination people with disabilities face in the labour market, timely access to high quality health care and wider support services. Without tackling these wider barriers, activation programmes are likely to have a limited impact. It is evident in reviewing this literature that the structural barriers to work are persistent, have long been evident and despite a range of initiatives, the main approaches to tackling them are largely unchanged and have not proved to be effective to any large degree. There is also a

danger that simply putting more pressure on people with health conditions and disabilities to find, remain and progress in work risks worsening these conditions, particularly with the growing prevalence of mental health conditions and evidence that greater benefit conditionality for this group appears largely ineffective (Dwyer et al., 2020).

7. Concluding remarks

In determining who is a long-term benefit recipient for the purposes of understanding what prevents them from progressing economically and socially, it was agreed that the focus should be on working-age means-tested benefit recipients who have been claiming for 12 months or longer. There is a clearer rationale for focusing on means-tested benefit which are designed to provide a safety net for low income individuals and families experiencing unemployment, periods of low earnings and high housing costs. In contrast, non-means-tested benefits are generally paid in recognition of the extra costs faced by particular groups (such as people with severe health conditions and disabilities) and eligibility is unrelated to work status. This definition is used to guide the literature review and the quantitative analysis which followed (McKnight and Kayitale, 2026).

Previously a distinction was made between most out-of-work and in-work benefits, but Universal Credit has blurred this boundary. This validates a focus on means-tested benefit receipt as a whole rather than on specific claimant groups as the wider question becomes not just whether people are able to progress from unemployment to work but whether they are able to secure sufficient income from work to gain financial independence.

A challenge faced by this literature review is that the research question is ahead of the curve in terms of evaluation evidence. There is very little research looking directly at this group taken as a whole. This has meant

that the review has had to cover a broad literature on related topics. A number of key findings have been identified:

- Understanding reliance on means-tested benefits requires extending the observation window beyond initial signs of progress as many exits from benefits are fragile due to the unstable nature of many low-paid entry-level jobs, the fluctuating nature of many health conditions and the greater risk of financial shocks in low-income households.
- Geographical factors, such as local labour market conditions, transport infrastructure, access to support services and features of the local housing market, can limit individuals' aspirations for financial independence.
- Lone parents, larger families and households with disabled members face particularly high barriers to avoiding long-term means-tested benefit receipt.
- Duration or state dependence and 'scarring effects' associated with unemployment, economic inactivity, experience of NEET, low-wage employment and under-utilisation of skills are factors shaping risks of long-term benefit receipt.
- Rising prevalence of ill-health and disabilities, particularly mental health conditions, which limit individuals' capability for sustained work and can lead to caring needs from other household or family members, pose a significant challenge. Evidence suggests that rising health- and disability-related economic inactivity can be both a driver and a consequence of long-term benefit receipt.
- High withdrawal rates of means-tested benefits as household incomes increase create a financial disincentive to in-work progression.
- There is good evidence that 'enabling' forms of active labour market programmes, in particular training, are the most effective at increasing labour market outcomes in the long-term. Increasing claimants' skill levels enables them to gain higher paid, more secure jobs with better prospects of progression.

- ‘Demanding’ forms of activation, such as monitoring eligibility requirements, have a role to play in the administration of benefits. However, for many claimants they are unlikely to result in employment outcomes which lead to long-term financial independence.
- In-work conditionality for Universal Credit claimants living in households with earnings below pre-determined thresholds, has led to a changing role for Jobcentres. DWP now has a much greater interest in how to support in-work progression. From their perspective, this can be achieved through increasing household work intensity or through pay progression. Claimants under this regime are required to meet regularly with work coaches but there is a limited amount of support they can provide in 10-minute meetings and much of the regime seems to entail putting pressure on claimants to take on more hours of work, seek pay rises or promotion, or change jobs.
- A wage floor in the form of statutory minimum wage rates has prevented employers from driving wage rates down in the presence of an extensive in-work benefit system but there is a danger that in-work benefits have unintentionally distorted the labour market through facilitating the viability of low-paid, insecure, poor-quality jobs. As income is topped-up through Universal Credit, claimants are able to accept low paid jobs with short and/or variable hours (such as many of those available in the gig-economy). The extent to which these have crowded-out good jobs is unknown but this may be hindering productivity and growth.
- The evidence base on in-work progression interventions is weak with some promising small-scale programmes in the form of sector-specific workforce development trials. DWP’s plan to integrate Jobcentres with the National Careers Service to create a ‘jobs and career services’ sounds promising but how it will work in practice to support in-work progression is unclear, as is the evidence base on which to inform the creation of an effective new service.

- The evidence base on effective activation policies for people with ill-health or disabilities is weak and the main barriers to progression and financial independence appear to be structural, requiring investment, legislation and changing mindsets.

In summarising the evidence on activation the authors draw on a similar framework used in HM Government (2014) and Bucelli and McKnight (2024). Such a framework is helpful in summarising a large body of evidence based on a range of different methodologies. The framework provides a summary assessment of the evidence in terms of certainty, strength and coverage, defined as follows:

Certainty Does the evidence identify a significant effect? Is there a clear consensus in the literature?

Strength How big is the effect and how direct is its influence?

Coverage How many of the target population does the intervention reach?

Table 2: Summary assessment of the evidence on effective strategies

	Certainty	Strength	Coverage
Activation of unemployed			
Monitoring	Medium	Low	High
Subsidised employment	Medium	Medium	Low
Job search assistance	Medium	Medium	High
Training	High	Medium	Medium
Reducing in-work poverty through progression			
In-work conditionality	Low	Low	Medium

Sector-specific workforce development	Medium	Low	Low
Policies targeted at people with disabilities and health conditions			
Activation	Low	Low	High

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