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Benefits Conditionality in the United Kingdom: Is It Common, and Is It Perceived to Be Reasonable?

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ABSTRACT

Programme-level data suggest that increasing numbers of claimants are subject to work-related behavioural requirements in countries like the United Kingdom. Likewise, academic qualitative research has suggested that conditionality is pervasive within the benefits system, and is often felt to be unreasonable. However, there is little quantitative evidence on the extent or experience of conditionality from claimants' perspectives. We fill this gap by drawing on a purpose-collected survey of UK benefit claimants ($n = 3801$). We find that the stated application of conditionality was evident for a surprisingly small proportion of survey participants—even lower than programme-level data suggest. Unreasonable conditionality was perceived by many of those subject to conditionality, but not a majority, with, for example, 26.2% believing that work coaches do not fully take health/care-related barriers into account. Yet, alongside this, a substantial minority of claimants not currently subject to conditionality (22.4%) report that conditionality has negatively affected their mental health. We argue that reconciling this complex set of evidence requires a more nuanced understanding of conditionality, which is sensitive to methodological assumptions, the role of time and implementation and the need to go beyond explicit requirements to consider implicit forms of conditionality. In conclusion, we recommend a deeper mixed-methods agenda for conditionality research.

1 | Introduction

Although 'individual rights to social benefits have always and everywhere been conditional in some ways' (Clasen and Clegg 2011, 171–172), high-income countries have considerably expanded the use of behavioural conditionality within social protection since the 1980s (Knotz 2020; Immervoll and Knotz 2018). 'Conditionality' refers to requirements to carry out work-related activities (e.g., job search, training, or being required to attend meetings to discuss work plans), and threatened cuts to benefits if these are not met ('sanctions'), usually with the

stated aim of 'activating' claimants into work. This expansion of work-related conditionality was initially focused on unemployed benefit claimants, but has been extended to encompass sickness/disability benefit claimants (Geiger 2017; OECD 2022), lone parents (Andersen 2020) and even working claimants (Wright and Dwyer 2022; Dwyer and Wright 2014).

Extensive research has critically examined these developments (Gray 2019; Dwyer et al. 2023). Research in Anglophone countries finds that many claimants experience work-related conditionality as counter-productive or punitive (Parsell et al. 2020;

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Wright 2023). In such contexts, there are widespread concerns that some claimants are being required to perform activities that are not reasonable given disability, caring or wider life circumstances, and are being unreasonably sanctioned when they fail to meet them (Edmiston, Patrick, and Garthwaite 2017; Wright 2023; Dwyer et al. 2023; Scullion and Curchin 2022).

However, our understanding of the extent and perceived reasonableness of conditionality is partial. Most previous research is based on qualitative interviews, which help us understand the lived experience of conditionality, but do not provide a representative picture of conditionality's prevalence, operation or impacts. Likewise, where quantitative research is available, it is primarily based on programme-level rather than individual-level data (van Oorschot 2013). To our knowledge, there are no academic surveys that quantify the experience of conditionality in any detail.

In this paper, we fill this gap using a purpose-collected broadly representative survey of UK benefit claimants in May/June 2022 ($n = 3801$) to answer three questions: (1) To what extent do benefit claimants experience work-related conditionality?, (2) How often are behavioural requirements experienced as unreasonable by claimants? and (3) How many claimants perceive that conditionality harms their mental health? In our concluding discussion, we situate our findings within the wider literature, suggesting a more nuanced account of the nature of conditionality in Anglophone countries.

1.1 | The Experience of (Unreasonable) Conditionality

Looking at the on-paper requirements placed on unemployed claimants across OECD countries, conditionality has increased, particularly across the 1980s/1990s (Knotz 2020; Immervoll and Knotz 2018). The detailed pattern is complex (e.g., maximum disqualification periods rose in the mid-1990s then fell; Knotz 2020, 98, Figure 4b), but the general direction of travel is clear. We have less systematic data about the extension of conditionality to other groups, but it is nevertheless apparent that conditionality has been increasingly applied to, *inter alia*, single parents (Jaehrling, Kalina, and Mesaros 2014; Finn and Gloster 2010) and sickness/disability benefit claimants (Geiger 2017).

Nevertheless, sharp differences in conditionality remain between claimant groups and between countries (Knotz 2020). These differences are not just in the extent of conditionality, but also in the nature of conditionality. Activation is often argued to be split between 'positive' activation, which requires people to take advantage of high-quality support/human capital development, versus 'negative' activation, which is compliance-based and relies primarily on the threat of sanctions (Geiger 2017; Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl 2008). However, it is perhaps better to conceive of enabling and mandatory activation as two distinct dimensions that can be combined in various ways (Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl 2008).

In countries like the United Kingdom, where there has been a 'wholesale roll-out of conditionality' (Fletcher and

Wright 2018:329), there is an extensive body of qualitative evidence on its pervasive nature (Wright 2023; Dwyer et al. 2023). For example, Wright and Patrick (2019, 606), argue that for 'typical' claimants, the risks of non-compliance serve as a 'constant backdrop' that 'seeps into every element' of interactions. Similarly, Dwyer and Wright's (2014) idea of 'ubiquitous conditionality' was framed around the ever-increasing extension of conditionality to, for example, in-work claimants, but is sometimes used to imply that 'virtually all' claimants experience conditionality (Wamsley, *in press*). This pervasive conditionality is often found to affect mental health (Wright and Dwyer 2022; Scullion and Curchin 2022; Williams 2021), partly because of reports it is unfairly applied (Dwyer et al. 2023; SSAC 2019), particularly to those with health problems/disabilities (Geiger 2017), lone parents (Wright 2023; Carey and Bell 2022) and in-work claimants (Wright and Dwyer 2022).

1.2 | How Common Is (Unreasonable) Conditionality?

However, other evidence qualifies these findings in three ways. First, many claimants are not subject to conditionality. For example, the main UK benefit 'Universal Credit' (UC) incorporates means-tested unemployment, incapacity, single parent and in-work benefits (though note that in early 2023, 2.5 million households were still claiming 'legacy' benefits; see below). According to official data, among the 5.9 million UC claimants in May 2023,¹ a majority (55.9%) were not subject to any conditionality (even attending meetings), and only 23.7% of claimants were subject to intensive conditionality (see Appendix S3A).

Second, even among claimants, administratively subject to conditionality, the extent to which they experience conditionality is not clear. Presently, in the United Kingdom, there are few sanctions for anything other than missing appointments (Appendix S3c). More broadly, there is an extensive literature on the complex interrelationship between formal policies and frontline practice, with conditionality being implemented in varying ways by street-level bureaucrats (van Berkel 2020; Kaufman 2020), sometimes unequally (Schram et al. 2009; Holcomb, Hetling, and Yeo 2023). Frontline workers may face incentives to implement conditionality even when policies suggest claimants should be exempt (Brodkin 2015, 13), or conversely to not apply sanctions even when policies suggest them (Trochymiak 2022). That said, discretion is constrained by organisational practices and wider structures, particularly in the United Kingdom (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016).

However, there is limited quantitative evidence about the extent of conditionality experienced by claimants. The only data that exist come from benefit agencies, and suggest that some claimants do not experience conditionality that they are, on paper, subject to. In the United Kingdom, for example, among UC claimants in 2017 known from administrative records to be subject to conditionality, 10% did not report having a 'claimant commitment' (the document that records claimants' responsibilities), even when using leading questions² (Foster et al. 2018,

42). Qualitative work from Ireland shows a similar picture (Finn 2021):

Most of the participants did not recall the ‘social contract’ [Record of Mutual Commitments] at all while none acknowledged having read it in any great detail, if at all. For participants it was one of many vaguely recalled documents that they signed in haste ...

To our knowledge, there is no quantitative evidence on how far claimants report being explicitly told about their requirements or the consequences of non-compliance.

Third, it is not clear how far claimants feel conditionality is reasonable. In the United Kingdom, surveys show high levels of overall satisfaction (above 80%; DWP 2023), although it is widely known from other fields that positive ‘satisfaction’ can coexist with poor experiences (Williams, Coyle, and Healy 1998). More detailed questions are scarce, but official surveys 2017–2019 are mixed: 90%+ of UC claimants thought that staff treated them fairly overall (DWP 2020), but only 54% agreed their claimant commitment took into account personal circumstances, and only 63% agreed the requirements were achievable (Foster et al. 2018). In other words, in the United Kingdom, independent evidence is almost non-existent, but 5-year-old official surveys suggest that, whilst the majority of claimants feel satisfied with their treatment, large minorities feel conditionality is unreasonable.

Our contribution is therefore to provide much-needed evidence on the extent and reasonableness of conditionality, which is currently lacking. To the extent that different results are in tension with one another, we further offer a new account that integrates diverse evidence into a coherent picture.

2 | Methods

We use a purpose-collected survey of UK benefit claimants in May/June 2022 ($n=3801$) via YouGov. This is the country’s largest online panel, containing a diverse group of 400,000 active users recruited from a variety of sources. To generate approximately representative samples, YouGov offers incentives to a representative sub-sample of the panel to participate, and non-response weights are also calculated to ensure that the final sample matches known population totals.

For our survey, over 150,000 people completed a short screening survey, with benefit claimants later invited to complete a detailed survey. This forms the third wave of the Welfare at a (Social) *Distance surveys* (a major rapid-response project looking at the experience of claiming benefits during Covid-19; see <https://www.distantwelfare.co.uk/>), so it includes both longitudinal respondents from earlier waves and a refreshment sample (weighted appropriately; see Appendix S2f).

We primarily focus on UC claimants, but some analyses also consider two ‘legacy’ benefits that UC replaced: Jobseeker’s Allowance (‘JSA’, an unemployment benefit) and Employment

and Support Allowance (‘ESA’, an incapacity benefit) (see Appendix S2b for details about sample selection for each table). We should note that conditionality has ebbed and flowed—sanctions rose sharply in 2010–2013, before almost ceasing during Covid-19, then rose from late 2021. In May/June 2022, $\approx 6.0\%$ of UC claimants subject to conditionality were under sanction; comparisons over time are complex (e.g., because UC sanctions usually last longer than legacy benefit sanctions), but the total number of sanction decisions is half that of 2012–2013 (Webster 2023, Figure 4).

This survey is broadly representative of UK claimants, although with two caveats. First, the panel under-represents those with weaker English language skills or digital access/skills, and if YouGov’s weighting variables do not measure these (or sufficiently good proxies), biases will result. Second, for our survey, there is under-coverage of benefit claims compared to administrative totals, partly because of the two-stage design (which multiplies reporting errors and under-represents short-term claims due to the lag between surveys), and partly because claimants consistently mis-report claims even in official surveys (DWP 2022, table M_8).

We take further steps to enhance the validity of the analysis. We include multiple measures of the extent/reasonableness of conditionality, and cross-check answers against open-text responses, as well as cross-checking totals against administrative data (see below). All analyses were conducted using Stata 18.0MP. Data are available from the UK Data Service (SN6989), and replication code is available from <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/2AQHE>.

3 | Results

3.1 | The Extent of Conditionality

We firstly focus on whether claimants report being subject to conditionality per se. Because claimants are likely to be unaware of administrative categories, we asked about what they were required to do; for example, out-of-work UC claimants were asked to choose the first statement that applies:

- You have to **search and apply for jobs**.
- You have to **prepare for work** (e.g. training or work experience), but not search for jobs.
- You sometimes have to **speak to your Jobcentre adviser** (‘work coach’), but not prepare for work.
- You **don’t have to do anything** (other than tell DWP³ about changes in your circumstances).
- Don’t know.

Where claimants said ‘don’t know’, we used information from other questions where available (on whether they had to attend appointments, the hours of activities required or open text responses). Because UC is a household-level benefit where

conditionality depends on both partners, we also split this by the working status of the respondent and their partner (those working 16+ hours/week or with a working partner are classified as ‘working’, as they are likely to be above the threshold which exempted people from conditionality; see Appendix S2b).

The results are shown in Table 1. This shows that only 9.2% were subject to intensive conditionality (i.e., they must apply for jobs), with a further 2.9% having to prepare for work, and 12.0% having to attend meetings (7.8% in non-working households in the top part of the table, 4.2% in working households below). A majority (64.5%) said they were subject to no conditionality whatsoever. The equivalent figures for UC claimants alone were 10.9% subject to intensive conditionality, and 59.1% subject to no conditionality.

This diverges from the official data (in Table 1) for several reasons.⁴ First, there is some discretion in how policies are applied at street level (as discussed above). We should expect self-reported conditionality to be lower than administrative data, because some claimants are administratively subject to conditionality but are exempt in practice due to work coach discretion (known as ‘easements’); for example, due to health reasons, or within working benefit units (see Appendix S2b).

Second, there will be times when claimants are subject to conditionality but are unaware/forget because it is applied ‘lightly’, particularly where work coaches decide that the claimant is already doing enough (moreover, many ‘don’t know/inconsistent responses’ are probably subject to conditionality). Third, some inconsistencies will arise because of widely observed recall errors about, for example, claiming per se (DWP 2022, table M_8), signing a ‘claimant commitment’ (Foster et al. 2018), or being sanctioned (Hasenfeld, Ghose, and Larson 2004, 314). Our survey may also under-represent those who are subject to conditionality; for example, because it under-represents short-term claims (see above).

We return to methodological issues in the discussion below. It is clear, though, that irrespective of the data source, over half of UC claimants are not subject to conditionality.

Our main interest, though, is in exploring the experience of conditionality among those who say that they are subject to it (making our results partly robust to the under-representation/misreporting of conditionality groups per se). Table 2 shows claimants’ self-reports of what they were asked to do, and whether they were warned if their benefits would be stopped/reduced if they didn’t do it (see Appendix S2a for full question text). Note that the question leaves it to the claimant to define a ‘warning that [their] benefits will be stopped/reduced’.

Among those who say they are subject to intensive conditionality, 56.5% say they have signed a ‘claimant commitment’ in the past year (setting out requirements), and 51.5% have been asked to search for work; only 18.2% report no explicit conditionality of any sort. Yet, among claimants who report that they have to search/apply for jobs, only 56.5% say they have been directly asked to search/prepare for work, with fewer still (25.5%) reporting being explicitly warned they will be sanctioned.

Finally, we examine sanctions themselves (focusing on those due to missed appointments, which account for nearly all sanctions; Appendix S3c). Table 3 shows that among the minority who say they have to attend meetings, 25.9% reported missing an appointment in the past year. However, most of those who missed an appointment (66.3%) said they were not sanctioned because they quickly gave a reason (a further 7.4% weren’t sure). Moreover, some of those who were sanctioned had their benefits reinstated after appealing. Ultimately, 19.4% of those who missed a mandatory appointment said they received a benefit sanction. Expressed as a share of all claimants required to attend meetings, this means that 6.8% report being sanctioned before appeal in the past year (and a further 1.9% weren’t sure). This probably represents a slight under-reporting compared to official statistics (Appendix S3b).

TABLE 1 | Conditionality group in self-reported survey vs. official data.

	UC /ESA/JSA (survey data)		UC (survey data)		UC (DWP ¹)
Not working benefit unit ²	68.5%	[66.7–70.4%]	61.0%	[58.6–63.4%]	62.4%
Intensive conditionality	9.2%	[8.0–10.5%]	10.9%	[9.4% to 12.6%]	25.8%
Prepare for work	2.9%	[2.3–3.7%]	2.5%	[1.8% to 3.4%]	5.3%
Meetings only	7.8%	[6.7–9.2%]	9.1%	[7.6% to 10.8%]	2.0%
No requirements	42.1%	[40.2–44.0%]	31.9%	[29.7% to 34.2%]	29.3%
Don’t know/inconsistent	6.5%	[5.5–7.8%]	6.7%	[5.4% to 8.3%]	0.01%
Working benefit unit ²	31.5%	[29.6–33.3%]	39.0%	[36.6–41.4%]	37.6%
Meetings only	4.2%	[3.5–5.0%]	5.5%	[4.6% to 6.7%]	16.9%
No requirements	22.4%	[20.8–24.1%]	27.2%	[25.1% to 29.4%]	20.7%
Don’t know/inconsistent	4.9%	[4.1–5.8%]	6.2%	[5.2% to 7.5%]	0.01%
No requirements (total)	64.5%	[62.5–66.5%]	59.1%	[56.6–61.6%]	37.6%
Sample size	3,801		2,446		

¹Source: DWP Stat–Xplore for May–June 2022 (accessed 1/11/2022).

²See text/Appendix 2b. Totals in bold may not reflect a sum of displayed subcategories due to rounding.

TABLE 2 | Self-reported conditionality among UC/ESA/JSA claimants.

	Intensive conditionality	Meetings only (working) ¹	Meetings only (non-working) ¹	No req's (non-working) ¹	All claims ²
Signed 'claimant commitment'	55.1% [48.0–62.0%]	41.3% [32.4–50.9%]	24.0% [18.3–30.8%]	9.2% [7.6–11.2%]	21.5% [19.8–23.2%]
Asked to...	56.5% [49.5–63.3%]	22.1% [14.8–31.6%]	14.6% [8.8–23.3%]	2.1% [1.2–3.6%]	11.7% [10.3–13.3%]
search for work (if not working)	51.5% [43.8–59.2%]	7.3% [0.8–44.7%]	7.7% [4.2–13.9%]	0.8% [0.3–2.0%]	8.7% [7.3–10.2%]
increase my hours of work (if working)	21.7% [11.4–37.5%]	13.2% [7.2–23.0%]	7.0% [1.9–22.1%]	3.2% [0.9–10.2%]	6.4% [4.8–8.5%]
go on a training course	15.9% [11.3–22.0%]	5.8% [2.6–12.6%]	6.5% [2.4–16.5%]	0.7% [0.3–2.1%]	3.8% [3.0–5.0%]
Sanction warning if...	25.5% [19.6–32.4%]	11.2% [6.2–19.2%]	3.2% [1.7–6.0%]	0.9% [0.4–2.0%]	4.5% [3.7–5.4%]
do not search for work (not working) ¹	24.9% [18.5–32.5%]	4.2% [0.4–31.0%]	2.2% [0.9–5.0%]	0.7% [0.3–1.6%]	4.1% [3.2–5.2%]
do not increase hours (working) ¹	20.9% [10.2–38.0%]	7.0% [3.4–14.0%]	3.3% [1.0–10.6%]	3.0% [0.5–15.0%]	4.0% [2.8–5.7%]
do not go on a training course	6.6% [3.8–11.1%]	5.8% [2.4–13.5%]	1.4% [0.5–4.0%]	0.0% [0.0–0.2%]	1.2% [0.8–1.7%]
None of the above	18.2% [13.6–23.9%]	42.7% [33.6–52.4%]	66.1% [57.7–73.6%]	89.3% [87.2–91.1%]	72.1% [70.2–73.9%]
<i>n</i>	320	160	255	1722	3801

¹See text/Appendix 2b on 'not-working/working'.

²All claims' includes conditionality groups not shown in the table (inc. 'don't know' [*n* = 385], 'no requirements(working)' [*n* = 870] and 'prepare for work' [*n* = 89]).

TABLE 3 | Whether UC claimants have been sanctioned in the past year.

Among those who...	...missed an appointment		...are required to attend meetings	
Missed appointment in past year	100%		25.9%	[22.4–29.4%]
Don't know			13.1%	[10.8–15.9%]
Of whom...				
Initially sanctioned	26.3%	[18.1–34.4%]	6.8%	[4.4–9.2%]
...benefit reinstated on appeal	6.9%	[2.8–16.1%]	1.8%	[0.7–4.4%]
...ultimately sanctioned	19.4%	[13.6–26.9%]	5.0%	[3.5–7.2%]
Not sanctioned	66.3%	[56.9–74.5%]	91.3%	[88.0–93.7%]
Don't know	7.4%	[3.3–15.8%]	1.9%	[0.9–4.3%]
<i>n</i>	216		887	

The survey also contains further questions that echo the main findings here. For example, the DWP has a default expectation of 35 hours/week of work search activity, although this can be amended to reflect people's health/caring responsibilities.⁵ However, in our survey, only half (47.8% [41.7%–54.0%]) of claimants subject to intensive conditionality said that they were required to do work-related activities full-time, and a further 25.3% [20.6%–30.8%] said they were required to do a lot, but less than full-time (8–29 hours/week).⁶ This again shows that the reported experience of conditionality is lower than might be expected. Further detail on missed appointments is given in Appendix A1.

3.2 | Perceived Reasonableness

There are widespread reports of conditionality being perceived as unreasonable given people's health/disability/caring responsibilities, particularly in the United Kingdom (see above). To investigate this, we separated out whether (i) claimants had told their work coach about health problems/caring responsibilities; (ii) work coaches took these into account and (iii) claimants felt conditionality was reasonable overall. For clarity, we focus on UC claimants who are subject to any conditionality (including meetings-only)+report some contact with work coaches+report a physical/mental health problem/caring responsibility (see Appendix S2e).

First, most UC claimants (64.8%) with health problems/caring responsibilities said they had told their work coach about these (Table 4). A third (35.2%) said they had not (most commonly because their work coach did not ask, or because they did not feel comfortable describing them online). However, we find a slightly different picture when we ask whether claimants 'have told Jobcentre advisers about all the things that affect whether I can find/keep work' (not shown in the tables, but using the same sample), where 81.3% agree [74.7%–87.9%] and only 5.9% disagree [2.5%–9.2%] (12.9% choose 'neither'/'don't know'). The most plausible interpretation is that many people are not telling work coaches about health/disability/caring that they feel is irrelevant, with only 5.9% of these claimants not telling work coaches about issues they feel are work-relevant.

TABLE 4 | Whether UC claimants have told their work coach about how health/disabilities/care responsibilities affect them, among claimants with barriers and subject to conditionality.

	% of responses (95% CI)	
Told work coach about all barriers	64.8%	[56.6–72.2%]
Has not told work coach about all barriers	35.2%	[27.8–43.4%]
Didn't feel comfortable talking about them in the online journal	11.0%	[6.9–17.2%]
Work coaches never asked me about them	9.6%	[6.2–14.5%]
Keep seeing different advisers and it's too much effort to keep explaining	8.0%	[4.4–14.2%]
Meetings with work coaches are too short and not enough time to explain	6.9%	[3.9–11.9%]
Not disclosed because of other problems	1.1%	[0.4–3.3%]
Not told as doesn't affect ability to work (written in)	0.4%	[0.1–2.0%]
<i>n</i>	220	

Second, just under half (47.8%) of UC claimants with health problems/caring responsibilities said their work coaches took into account the barriers they'd been told about when setting conditionality. A slight majority (52.2%) said they did not, in a variety of different ways (Table 5). We again checked this against a differently worded question in our survey (not shown in the tables), and similarly found that about half of these claimants (51.6% [43.4%–59.7%]) agreed that 'My Jobcentre advisers take into account all the things I told them that affect whether I can find/keep work', with significant numbers disagreeing (26.2% [19.1%–33.3%]) or saying they neither agree/disagree or don't know (22.2% [15.2%–29.2%]).

Finally, we also find large minorities expressing concerns when asked whether ‘the things my Jobcentre advisers ask me to do are reasonable (for me)’. Among these claimants, 44.9% agreed [36.9%–53.0%], but a sizeable minority disagreed (25.0% [17.9%–32.0%]), and a further sizeable minority neither agreed/disagreed or didn’t know (30.1% [22.4%–37.9%]). We further asked those who felt the requirements were unreasonable to explain why. Not everyone was asked this question and not everyone who was asked gave a response, but among the 43 free-text responses, three-quarters were about health/care-related unreasonableness, such as inappropriate hassle, attending Jobcentre interviews, the hours or type of work they’re asked to do or a general feeling that requirements are unreasonable.

In summary, among those subject to conditionality and with health/care-related barriers to work, we found them divided on whether they found their conditionality reasonable. Perceptions of unreasonableness were not uncommon, with just over half of

this group saying that their work coaches did not take their barriers into account when setting work-related requirements, and a quarter disagreeing that what was asked of them by their work coach was reasonable.

3.3 | Perceived Mental Health Impacts

Finally, in the context of reports from qualitative research about the mental health impacts of conditionality (see above), we asked half the sample:

What effects do you think that each of the following aspects of claiming [Universal Credit] have had on your mental health? ...

Being required to apply for jobs or take steps towards work

TABLE 5 | Whether work coaches take barriers into account when asking claimants to do things, among UC claimants with barriers and who are subject to conditionality.

	% of responses (95% CI)	
Work coaches takes everything into account	47.8%	[39.8–55.9%]
Work coach does not take everything into account	52.2%	[44.1–60.2%]
Ask me to take jobs that I can’t do	23.1%	[17.1–30.5%]
Ask to spend more time looking for work than I’m capable of	17.9%	[12.4–25.3%]
Ask to spend more time preparing for work than I’m capable of	10.9%	[6.9–16.8%]
Require me to attend more meetings than I can manage	12.6%	[8.2–18.9%]
Ask me to travel further than I can manage	6.6%	[4.0–10.8%]
Other ways that doesn’t take everything into account	5.8%	[3.0–11.0%]
<i>n</i>	219	

Table 6 shows that of those subject to intensive conditionality, within non-working benefit units, 44.0% reported that it made their mental health worse. Moreover, even among those only required to attend Jobcentre meetings (and not search for work), 34.5% reported that it made their mental health worse. This should be interpreted alongside Table 2 above, which shows that, for example, 14.6% of those in the ‘meetings-only (non-working)’ group say they have been asked to search for work, get more hours or go on a training course, and 3.2% say they have been threatened with sanctions, neither of which should occur.

Most surprisingly of all, sizeable minorities (22.4%) of people who were *not* currently subject to conditionality said that being required to ‘apply for jobs or take steps towards work’ had made their mental health worse. This cannot be because they have been asked to take steps towards work in the past year, which is reported by only 2.1% of those who report being in the ‘no requirements’ group in Table 2.

To explore this further, Table 7 looks at the predictors of reporting that conditionality harms mental health, among those not currently subject to conditionality (again, within non-working benefit units⁷). This shows that Black claimants are much less likely to say that conditionality made their mental health worse, for reasons that are unclear. Rates are also much higher among those who claimed about 1–2 years ago (July 2020–June 2021),

TABLE 6 | Self-reported effect of ‘being required to apply for jobs or take steps towards work’ on your mental health (non-working benefit units on UC/ESA/JSA).

	Intensive conditionality (%)		Meetings only (%)		No requirements (%)	
Made it worse	44.0	[34.2–53.8]	34.5	[21.7–47.3]	22.4	[18.9–25.9]
No impact	33.3	[24.3–42.4]	16.8	[9.3–24.3]	10.3	[7.8–12.8]
Made it better	5.9	[1.6–10.2]	–		1.4	[0.2–2.6]
Don’t know	9.0	[1.8–16.2]	8.3	[2.9–13.6]	7.8	[5.4–10.2]
Not applicable for me	7.7	[1.4–14.1]	40.4	[26.6–54.3]	58.0	[53.9,62.1]
<i>N</i>	168		116		873	

TABLE 7 | ‘Being required to apply for jobs or take steps towards work’ reported to make mental health worse (no conditionality requirements in non-working benefit units on UC/ESA).

	Raw association			Adjusted models		
When claimed, vs. since July 2021						
Jul/20 to Jun/21	17.8%	+	(−0.2% to 35.9%)	19.1%	*	(2.2% to 36.0%)
Shortly after Covid started	−3.2%		(−16.7% to 10.4%)	−3.3%		(−18.6% to 12.0%)
Before Covid started	7.2%		(−2.4% to 16.7%)	5.2%		(−6.0% to 16.3%)
Main benefit claimed is ESA, vs. UC	3.4%		(−3.6% to 10.3%)	5.0%		(−2.8% to 12.8%)
Gender: female vs. male	−4.7%		(−11.9% to 2.4%)	−4.3%		(−11.4% to 2.9%)
Age, vs. 55–65						
18–29	10.0%		(−8.0% to 28.0%)	12.5%		(−5.8% to 30.8%)
30–44	8.2%	*	(0.2% to 16.2%)	7.0%		(−1.5% to 15.6%)
45–54	6.2%		(−1.4% to 13.7%)	3.7%		(−3.9% to 11.2%)
Ethnicity, vs. White						
Black (inc. mixed)	−15.7%	*	(−29.7% to −1.7%)	−19.1%	**	(−29.4% to −8.8%)
Asian (inc. mixed)	10.5%		(−25.5% to 46.5%)	−8.1%		(−27.6% to 11.4%)
Other or refused	7.1%		(−15.7% to 29.9%)	9.9%		(−12.2% to 32.0%)
Education, vs. Low						
Medium or DK/refused	2.7%		(−5.0% to 10.4%)	2.4%		(−4.8% to 9.6%)
High	5.0%		(−4.1% to 14.1%)	4.7%		(−4.1% to 13.4%)
Barriers: Caring for children	−0.9%		(−11.8% to 10.0%)	−0.2%		(−11.8% to 11.4%)
Barriers: Caring for someone else	1.2%		(−8.7% to 11.2%)	2.6%		(−7.5% to 12.7%)
Mental health disability (vs. none)	12.8%	**	(6.3% to 19.3%)	12.0%	**	(5.7% to 18.3%)
Other disability (vs. none)	−3.6%		(−12.1% to 5.0%)	−4.3%		(−12.9% to 4.2%)
Sample size:	861–873			859		
Mutually adjusted for variables in table:	No			Yes		

Note: 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Coefficients refer to percentage point differences (estimated as average marginal effects from a logistic regression model). Overall prevalence in final estimation sample is 22.3%.

+ $p < 0.1$.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

and among those who currently have a mental health disability (note that most of these people say that their mental health problem started before their current claim Appendix S1b).

Together, these findings are a puzzle: Conditionality is not as widely reported as previous research would lead us to expect, yet a sizeable minority of those not subject to conditionality nevertheless report that their mental health has been harmed by being required to apply for jobs or take steps towards work. To interpret these findings, we need to think more deeply about the nature of conditionality, an argument we develop below.

4 | Discussion

The ‘pervasive’ nature of conditionality in the United Kingdom has been widely described in qualitative research—but there is almost no research enabling us to quantify this. The limited

prior quantitative research undertaken by benefits agencies offers a mixed picture. Among the minority of claimants officially subject to work-related conditionality, many do not report the de facto application of requirements (Foster et al. 2018, 42). Substantial minorities subject to conditionality report concerns around it, though satisfaction levels are high (Foster et al. 2018; DWP 2020, 2023). These findings present a puzzle for social security researchers and policymakers. In response, this paper presents the first academic survey detailing the experience of conditionality, using a new, purpose-designed study.

We found that most UC/JSA/ESA claimants are not subject to any conditionality, with only a minority (9.2%) subject to intensive conditionality, broadly similar to the picture from administrative data. Moreover, even among those who say they have to search/apply for jobs, only a slight majority (56.5%) report explicit requests (e.g., being asked to search for work), with fewer (25.5%) reporting being explicitly warned they will be sanctioned.

Indeed, among those subject to intensive conditionality, 18.2% reported no explicit conditionality of any sort in the past year—all of them were aware that they had to search/apply for jobs, and signing a claimant commitment is a condition of claiming, but they did not recall it in the survey. Sanctions were present but uncommon, with 6.8% of UC claimants required to attend meetings saying they have been sanctioned in the past year.

We also sought to quantitatively estimate the perceived (un)reasonableness of conditionality. We found that most claimants said that they had told their work coaches about health/disability/care-related barriers (though a substantial minority had not reported barriers they did not feel were relevant). However, claimants were divided on whether they found the system's requirements reasonable. Perceptions of unreasonableness were relatively common, with 52.2% of this group saying that their work coaches did not take their circumstances and barriers into account when asking them to do things, and 25.0% disagreeing outright that what was asked of them by their work coach was reasonable. While there are few previous quantitative studies (and those that exist are conducted by official agencies), their results are broadly similar to ours.

Overall, given that there are 5.5 m UC claimants and a further 1.5 m ESA/JSA claimants not claiming UC, this still means that large numbers of people are subject to conditionality (e.g., 655 k [575–750 k] individuals report being subject to intensive conditionality and 320 k [265–390 k] threatened with sanctions). Nevertheless, there is a puzzle as to how to reconcile these findings with qualitative evidence on the pervasive, often punitive experience of conditionality (Dwyer and Wright 2014; Wright and Patrick 2019; Dwyer et al. 2023)—and also how to interpret the 22.4% of non-working claimants not subject to conditionality who nevertheless say that being required to apply for jobs/take steps towards work had harmed their mental health.

4.1 | Explaining Contradictory Findings on Conditionality

We argue that there are four potential explanations for this puzzle, all of which have consequences for conditionality research.

First, contradictory findings can arise because of overlooked methodological considerations. Claimant surveys may under-represent claimants who feel that conditionality is unreasonable (particularly surveys by benefits agencies that typically exclude those leaving benefits, and have low response rates among continued claimants—though this is unlikely to affect our survey). There may also be errors in people's reporting of their conditionality group.⁸ But equally, qualitative research may over-represent claimants with negative experiences, particularly where recruitment occurs via advocacy organisations. We should also note that the influential Welfare Conditionality project purposely selected people 'who were subject to welfare conditionality', and therefore says much less about those who are not subject to conditionality (Dwyer 2018, 15).

Second, we need to understand how conditionality experiences imperfectly relate to formal conditionality groups. In Table 2, we show that some claimants who say they are not formally

subject to conditionality nevertheless report being asked to do things. For example, among working people only required to attend meetings, 22.1% reported having to search for work, get more hours or go on a training course; and 14.6% said they had been threatened with a sanction. It is possible that work coaches are implicitly/explicitly applying conditionality beyond its officially designated boundaries, which is plausible in the light of wider evidence on street-level bureaucracy (see above), although we have no direct evidence here. Whatever the reason, there is wider evidence that non-mandatory requests (Newton and Sainsbury 2017, 76; SSAC 2019, 23) and programmes (IFF Research 2018, 66) are sometimes interpreted by claimants as being mandatory.

Third, we need to understand the complex timescale of conditionality experiences. In a narrow sense, our survey relates to a different period than much of the qualitative research, and while conditionality/sanctions were relatively high in May/June 2022, they were lower than 2010–2014 (Webster 2023, Figure 4). However, even within our survey, part of the apparent inconsistencies will be due to changing time frames; for example, Table 2 shows people's experiences over the past year, whereas Table 1 refers to the present moment. Reported mental health harms from conditionality among those not subject to it similarly appear to be partly because of past experiences.⁹ We must make sure that we tease apart the time period that negative experiences refer to, within both qualitative and quantitative research. But more conceptually, we also need to understand that past experiences can cast a shadow over the present.

Fourth, we need to distinguish between explicit and implicit conditionality. Clearly, some conditionality is 'explicit', that is, behavioural requirements and the threat of sanctions that are routinely stated in benefits agency communications and interactions (Finn 2021, 257–259 terms these 'techniques of conditionality'). However, even without these, the existence of sanctions may create a feeling that benefits are insecure, qualified and contingent—that is, conditionality may be 'implicit'. This has elsewhere been referred to as the 'latent coercive potential of behavioural conditionality' where expectations act as a 'form of normative judgement passed on (and onto) claimants' (Kaufman 2020, 214–216). Explicit techniques of conditionality may therefore not have a direct relationship with how conditionality is perceived, felt and negotiated in the everyday lives of claimants.

The existence of implicit conditionality can be seen directly in wider qualitative research, in the lingering fear of sanctioning among groups that now rarely report sanctions (Wright, Robertson, and Stewart 2022, 162), or from Finn's (2021, 257–261) research in Ireland, where despite a surprising 'lightness' of explicit conditionality, the threat of sanctions 'hangs over the entirety of the population and serves to ensure engagement even if it amounts to "tactical mimicry" of a good jobseeker'. It is also consistent with wider arguments that a default strategy of 'surveillance, sanction and deterrence' (Fletcher and Wright 2018) in the United Kingdom has created a generalised climate that means even when behavioural requirements are not explicitly articulated, there may nonetheless be an 'expectation' or 'feeling' that conditionality is operating. Implicit conditionality may then be internalised, reproduced and performed by claimants,

gaining greater governmental power through its variability and uncertainty (Whitworth and Carter 2014).

The qualitative literature has documented the ‘ubiquitous’ (Dwyer and Wright 2014) nature of conditionality; our paper helps to understand that this does not mean that explicit conditionality is ubiquitous in the present moment, but rather that conditionality is widely felt by claimants, either due to past experiences or because of an implicit sense of threat in the present. That said, we cannot quantify exactly how far our findings are due to past experiences versus implicit conditionality, which would require a new survey and new measures. However, it is clear that some of these mechanisms are at play, and plausibly interact—perhaps past negative experiences lead to a present perception of implicit conditionality, which in turn leads voluntary requests to be interpreted as mandatory. Although there is further work to be done, this more nuanced understanding of conditionality is important for policy and for research, as we discuss below.

4.2 | Limitations and Implications

Even though we hope that our survey contributes to our understanding of conditionality, we must bear in mind two limitations. First, where surveys are done independently of government agencies, it is difficult to get a representative sample of claimants. While our sample here is broadly representative, it is likely to under-represent more marginalised claimants. Second, accurate measurement of conditionality is difficult, partly because self-reported claim data are unreliable (people may be confused about whether activities are mandatory/voluntary, or unaware of whether they are categorically exempt from conditionality vs. work coach acts of discretion). Moreover, as we argued above, further care is needed in researching conditionality to capture the nuances of a complex phenomenon.

There is therefore a need for more research. We need linked survey-administrative data to help address the challenges around measuring conditionality. However, the most important of all is the need for more qualitative and quantitative studies that are attentive to these nuances in the nature of conditionality—to tease apart differences of timeframe and between explicit versus implicit conditionality; to understand how claimants benchmark whether conditionality is ‘reasonable’; and for us to understand how different policies shape these different experiences.

Our findings also have three policy implications:

1. Given the relatively common perception that requirements are unreasonable, the study draws attention to the need to create a proper system of administrative justice surrounding welfare conditionality, so that the exercise of discretionary power by work coaches is accountable and demonstrably fair (JUSTICE and Administrative Justice Council 2021). These administrative justice policies/experiences are rarely compared across countries, and this is a gap that should be filled.
2. The impact of changes to explicit conditionality on claimant experiences may be muted. Transformed experiences

may require sustained change (to address claimants’ past as well as current experiences) and changes in the general tone of politicians and the culture of the system (to address implicit conditionality).

3. Our paper focuses on the experience of conditionality, and there is not the space here to fully review its impacts. Still, it is clear that conditionality’s initial positive impacts on employment must be balanced against less positive medium-term impacts; that impacts on health/hardship are negative; and that conditionality has more negative effects on claimants with health conditions/disabilities (Pattaro et al. 2022; Geiger 2017). In this context, there is a risk—particularly in the United Kingdom—that the intensification of explicit conditionality for some bleeds into an intensification of implicit conditionality for all, generating wider negative impacts. Although narrow quantitative evaluations miss these impacts, policymakers cannot ignore them.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the University of Salford.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the UK Data Service at <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8689-3>, Study Number 8689.

Endnotes

- ¹ DWP official data for May 2023 via <https://stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk/> (‘don’t knows’ excluded) (accessed 5 February 2024).
- ² Claimants were asked, ‘Thinking back to the process of claiming Universal Credit, you would have agreed to a Commitment online that sets out how you would look for work as well as the type of work you would look for. Do you remember accepting your commitment?’.
- ³ DWP = Department for Work and Pensions.
- ⁴ The survey is UK-wide, while the DWP’s statistics are GB-only—but the 2.5% of our sample in Northern Ireland is unlikely to noticeably skew our results.
- ⁵ See https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2021-0835/060_Expected_hours_V5-0.pdf /https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/universal_credit_expectation_to (accessed 25 November 2024).
- ⁶ The remainder said they were required to do < 8 h (7.8% [4.5%–13.1%]), nothing (5.3% [3.3%–8.5%]) or couldn’t even guess (13.7% [9.8%–18.8%]).
- ⁷ Table 7 uses logistic regression models (applying survey weights), and reports the results as average marginal effects due to the frequent misinterpretations made when using odds ratios (Mood 2010). The model passes a goodness-of-fit test (using ESTAT after SVY; $p = 0.29$). Details of the construction of the variables in Table 7 are given in Appendix S2d.
- ⁸ For example, we find that 10% of those who report being subject to intensive conditionality also say that they have been found to have either Limited Capability for Work/Work-Related Activity at a WCA, so should not be subject to intensive conditionality.

⁹In Table 7, the apparent inconsistency (reporting mental health harms despite not currently experiencing conditionality) was much more common for those claiming for 1–2 years than recent claimants. More direct evidence comes from the free-text responses of people who said their work coach made unreasonable demands of them. Of the 66 respondents who say they are subject to conditionality but their work coach made unreasonable demands, and who provided a free-text explanation, 11 clearly show that they are talking about past experiences that do not reflect their current situation (e.g., ‘when I 1st claimed, was sent for cleaning despite not being able to walk unaided, eventually successfully appealed to be placed in ESA support group’), while a further four responses hint that this was in the past (e.g., using the past tense to describe the perceived unreasonableness).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.