



Centre for  
**Society and  
Mental Health**

# **Reforming the Work Capability Assessment:** evidence from a Deliberative Dialogue Workshop

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# Summary and recommendations arising from deliberative dialogue

The current Work Capability Assessment (WCA) has been widely criticised for being distressing, difficult to navigate, and inadequate in assessing individuals' true capacity for work. Research led by Dr Annie Irvine, using existing data from the Welfare Conditionality Project<sup>1</sup>, found that while mental health impacts capacity for work, a range of social, structural, economic and interpersonal factors also play a significant role, highlighting the limitations of the WCA's health-centric approach. In June 2024, a workshop was held to explore a more holistic approach to assessing work capacity, bringing together policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

The first session of the workshop explored the opportunities and risks of a holistic approach to assessing work capacity. Opportunities at the individual level included fostering trust between claimants and Work Coaches, enabling more open and comprehensive discussions about barriers to work, and providing better-targeted support. However, risks included raising unrealistic expectations for support, the potential for claimants to remain stuck in a 'holding pattern' if services lacked capacity, and concerns over how conditionality might be applied to broader barriers to work such as housing. Some feared that expanding assessment beyond health could delegitimise mental health conditions or increase stigma for claimants.

At a system-wide level, a holistic approach could improve claimant engagement and trust in the DWP, potentially leading to better outcomes. However, concerns were raised about increased subjectivity in assessments, complexities in appeals processes,

## Summary and recommendations arising from deliberative dialogue

and the quality of assessment reports. Public and political attitudes posed further risks, particularly around conditionality and the perception of fraud. Additionally, DWP capacity constraints could create short-term demand spikes as claimants engage in longer, more detailed assessments, though long-term demand might decrease with improved support.

The second session of the workshop focused on what a holistic assessment could look like. Participants emphasised the need to shift from the current health-centric WCA to a more asset-based model, which would focus on strengths, capabilities and aspirations, as well as considering a broader range of factors that influence a claimant's capacity for work. This includes non-health barriers such as childcare, housing, transport, and financial hardship. A broader approach would help identify appropriate work for claimants and improve targeted support. However, concerns were raised about the practical challenges of implementing such an approach, including the risk of re-traumatising claimants, the need for skilled Work Coaches, and the difficulty in balancing public buy-in with a more holistic assessment.

The workshop also discussed the importance of a more collaborative, triage-based system where Work Coaches could connect claimants with local services, particularly those in the third sector. However, issues with inconsistent services and long waiting lists could limit the effectiveness of such a system. It was suggested that Work Coaches might benefit from working outside traditional Jobcentre settings, in more community-based spaces.

## Summary and recommendations arising from deliberative dialogue

### Recommendations arising from deliberative dialogue

1. Reform the Work Capability Assessment to move away from a narrow focus on health:
  - Shift the WCA from a focus on health to a broader understanding of capacity for work, incorporating not only health but also non-health barriers such as housing, childcare, transport, employability, and financial hardship.
  - Ensure that any assessment recognises the complex, intertwined nature of these barriers and allows claimants to define and prioritise the key challenges they face in accessing work.
  - Consider adopting an asset-based approach to assessment that identifies the strengths, capabilities and aspirations of claimants, alongside their support needs.
2. Training and support for Work Coaches:
  - Provide specialised training for Work Coaches to equip them with a broader range of skills to address various barriers to work, including mental health, housing, and financial issues.
  - Explore models like the keyworker system, where claimants are matched with a consistent, trusted individual who is able to sensitively elicit information and assist with referral to experts in specific fields, such as housing or substance abuse, to better address multifaceted challenges.
  - Provide Work Coaches with training in communication approaches that avoid re-traumatisation and help them navigate sensitive conversations around difficult personal barriers.
3. Integrate support services with capability assessment:
  - Develop stronger links between Jobcentres and third-sector organisations to ensure claimants are connected to local resources that address specific barriers to work, such as childcare, housing support, or mental health services.

## Summary and recommendations arising from deliberative dialogue

- Investigate the possibility of data sharing between public and third-sector organisations to streamline access to services and ensure claimants are referred to appropriate support.

### 4. Improve the cultural and physical environment of Jobcentres:

- Foster a work culture within Jobcentres that develops a greater sense of autonomy around case management and emphasises the importance of trust-building with claimants.
- Support Work Coaches' wellbeing as they adjust to changes in this work culture and the new responsibilities it may bring.
- Invest in improving the physical environment of Jobcentres to make them more welcoming and supportive. This could include more comfortable waiting areas and less emphasis on security to reduce claimant anxiety.

### 5. Reassess the role of conditionality and sanctions:

- Work towards scaling back the punitive aspects of conditionality and sanctions, focusing instead on providing the necessary support to address the full range of barriers to work that claimants face.



01.

# Introduction

## Introduction

Evidence from claimants, disabled people's organisations and academic research shows that the current Work Capability Assessment (WCA) is problematic as a way of assessing people's capacity for work. The WCA is experienced as threatening, distressing and difficult to understand. Importantly, claimants feel that the WCA process does not allow them to accurately explain how their health problems limit their capacity for work, and this seems to be felt most strongly by people experiencing mental health problems.

The previous Government proposed eliminating the WCA, and the current Labour Government has now indicated that this will be enacted over the coming three years.<sup>2</sup> Whilst removing or reforming the WCA is what many critics have been hoping for, it opens up many new concerns about what the alternative may look like. Against this backdrop, recent research conducted at the ESRC Centre for Society and Mental Health and the University of York School for Business and Society<sup>3</sup>, has looked in close detail at how claimants understand and make sense of their mental health problems, in relation to work and welfare.

Our core research finding is that capacity for work is clearly about much more than mental health alone. People's distress is genuine, real and at times severe, but it is rarely the whole story of what is shaping and constraining their ability to obtain sustainable and fulfilling work. A range of social, structural, economic and interpersonal factors also play a significant role. However, the WCA in its current form is concerned exclusively with the functional impacts of health conditions.

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As an entirely health-centric assessment process, health is the only part of a claimant's experience that can be brought to the discussion of capacity for work when engaging with the benefits system. This led us to consider whether the WCA's narrow focus on the impact only of health conditions could be part of the reason that it is such an unhelpful tool, particularly for claimants who experience mental health problems that are often intrinsically linked with social circumstances. What could a more holistic approach to understanding and assessing capacity for work look like and could it overcome some of the problems of the WCA?

In June 2024, we therefore held a deliberative dialogue workshop focused on the opportunities and challenges that might arise from a more holistic approach to assessing capacity to work. This workshop brought together policymakers, practitioners and researchers into a deliberative dialogue, seeking to answer questions surrounding capacity assessment and barriers to work. This report presents a summary of the conversations that took place during the workshop and the recommendations that arise. As context, we first provide an overview of the underpinning research.

## Understanding Mental Health in the UK Welfare System

The research which informed this deliberative dialogue workshop was a Qualitative Secondary Analysis led by Dr Annie Irvine, which sought to better understand the experience of benefit claimants who are affected by mental health problems. Drawing on a large archive of qualitative longitudinal data generated by an earlier academic study, the Welfare Conditionality Project<sup>4</sup>, the project team selected a sample of 70 participant cases from a larger subset of participants who described experience of mental health problems. All participants included in this secondary analysis had experience of mental health problems. However, in-depth narrative analysis revealed that the functional impacts of psychological distress were rarely the only thing constraining people's capacity for work.

In describing how and why they became unemployed, and the barriers faced in returning to work, claimants perceived a

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multifaceted range of constraints, considerations and contingencies, going far beyond mental health alone. These included (but were not limited to) parenthood and childcare, housing and homelessness, employer attitudes and workplace flexibility, transport and travel, access to education and training, digital literacy, and financial and material hardship (see Appendix 1). All of these factors can directly influence individuals' capacity for work, but it is clear that the current WCA fails to recognise them.

Close reading of participants' narratives showed that the range of social, economic, material and relational adversities which brought about people's mental health difficulties were in many cases the same set of circumstances which made work difficult or impossible to sustain. For most participants, there had been times in their life when distress was an absolute or predominant barrier to work or work-related activity. However, in participants' accounts of their lived experience, mental distress was rarely the only barrier to work that they identified. Many participants experienced significant levels of mental distress whilst concurrently facing a range of non-health barriers to work. Looked at over time, these health and non-health factors were typically bound together in complex ways, and their relative impact fluctuated according to changing context. At the same time, the majority of participants wanted to work as and when their circumstances permitted, and indeed many had phases of employment on and off during the course of the WelCond research project.

These research findings led the project team to conclude that the assessment of 'capacity for work' should be based on a much broader conceptualisation of work capability. This broader conceptualisation should include a claimant's full range of contextual constraints and support needs – both health and non-health. With this in mind, the team planned a workshop of policy and practice stakeholders, which sought to operationalise the findings and determine their relevance for policy change.

## Introduction

### Workshop description

Following discussions with the research team, a stakeholder workshop was convened by the Policy Institute at King's, designed and facilitated by Dr Gabriel Lawson. Held in June 2024, the workshop intended to address the following key question:

*What would be the opportunities and challenges of an approach to assessing work capacity that took a holistic approach – rather than one that is framed only around a notion of 'ill health'?*

In order to answer this question, the workshop sought to create a dialogue among participants, grounded in the research, and involving individuals with a range of different perspectives and experiences. The process used was inspired by deliberative theory, in that the research team presented their findings, answered questions from participants, and then stepped back, allowing the participants to deliberate regarding the findings and their relevance for changing the WCA. Ahead of the workshop, a briefing pack summarising the findings from the project was circulated to participants. Case studies and quotes from research interviews were included within the advance briefing pack and in the opening presentation from the research team.

Sixteen participants attended the workshop, along with four research team members and the facilitator. Those in attendance were from a variety of backgrounds, including central government, think tanks, frontline workers and organisation managers from third sector employment support providers, and those with first-hand experience of delivering assessments<sup>5</sup>. Colleagues from the Civil Service attended in an 'observer' capacity, as the workshop fell within the purdah period prior to the 2024 General Election. Three stakeholders who were unable to attend due to unforeseen circumstances were consulted on an individual basis. Whilst they were not involved in the group deliberative dialogue, they were able to reflect on the advance briefing pack materials and provided written and/or verbal responses in follow-up communications soon after the workshop; their perspectives have been incorporated to this report.

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The workshop took place in-person over the course of a half-day, and was split into two sessions: the first focused around the potential opportunities and risks of holistic assessment; the second focused around the shape a new form of assessment might take. Over the course of these two sessions, participants assessed how broadening the assessment of capacity for work beyond a limited notion of 'health' might unlock new possibilities within the welfare system. Participants were encouraged to think about the micro-level (the individual service user) and the macro-level (the system as a whole). The findings below encapsulate the discussions which participants had across the two sessions.

The workshop was run under Chatham House Rules, and therefore comments in this report are unattributed to individuals.

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# Findings from the workshop

# Session 1:

## Opportunities and risks of holistic assessment

In summary, opportunities that may result from broadening assessment beyond the current health-centric WCA were centred around better understanding, greater trust between claimants and the system, and more effective support; while the risks were primarily focused on political and public attitudes towards a more holistic assessment, and structural constraints currently present within the system.

### Individual level

Opportunities at an individual level were focused around the possibility of individuals receiving more appropriate and comprehensive support, which would then facilitate claimants accessing appropriate work for their specific circumstances. Workshop participants recognised and agreed with the extensive range of non-health barriers to work which the research team identified within the interview data, with those working in frontline services seeing many echoes of their professional encounters with clients.

Participants felt that the opportunity to have an open conversation around a wider range of barriers to work would result in increased trust between individual claimants and Work Coaches. Honest and holistic accounts of the barriers that claimants face could mean that Work Coaches can more effectively understand and support individuals with complex needs. It was agreed that, as many claimants face multiple barriers to work, a more holistic form of assessment should attempt to recognise how these factors interact and potentially allow claimants to prioritise which they see as the most salient in constraining their ability to move into appropriate and sustainable work. In a more holistic approach, mental health may not necessarily emerge at the top of this list.



## Findings from the workshop

Many workshop participants expressed the view that, under the current system of assessment, claimants withhold relevant information from Work Coaches from fear of sanctions. Under a more holistic approach to assessing capacity for work, claimants who are currently required to focus on their health issues in order to secure and maintain refuge in the 'safe' (non-conditional) part of the system would be more able to begin also discussing and addressing the non-health barriers which prevent them from working. Moving away from health-centric assessments and instead recognising a broader range of barriers to work could result in a much clearer and more comprehensive picture of what support and resource claimants need in order to enter work. This in turn would result in better targeted support for claimants, potentially involving a stepped action plan and support which acknowledges what appropriate work looks like for the individual.

It was felt that one of the strengths of a holistic approach to assessment would be improved 'triage' as claimants could be directed to local services to support them in terms of specific needs. Participants envisioned a larger role for the third sector as part of this, with Jobcentres developing better connections with local VCSE organisations which can help address claimants' barriers to accessing work. Workshop participants from VSCE organisations were keen to point out that there are individual examples of such models already working very effectively, but that this is not yet widespread. Good practice could be shared and expanded.

Risks at an individual level centred around the challenge of moving from a flawed but at least clearly demarcated system of health-based assessment to a less well-defined decision-making mechanism based on a potentially wide set of criteria. Workshop participants were mindful that personalisation and tailoring necessarily entails the use of discretion by frontline workers, bringing a risk of inequity and loss of (supposed) objectivity that the current system provides.

Another risk of a more holistic approach, raised by participants, was that inviting claimants to bring a wider range of issues into the assessment process might begin to raise unrealistic expectations of support for these barriers. Work Coaches could signpost claimants

## Findings from the workshop

to other services, but often capacity of those external organisations is limited and resources finite. Moreover, claimants may have to undergo another assessment to access support, which they may turn out to be ineligible for. Alternatively, Work Coaches would have to openly acknowledge that other public services lack capacity to deal with these barriers. This could result in claimants being left in a 'holding pattern' indefinitely, with clear barriers to work identified but not dealt with. Participants questioned whether some very complex barriers to accessing work could ever be dealt with by the state (in the form of Work Coaches, social workers, NHS staff, and others) in a satisfactory manner.

Questions were raised by several participants around the role of conditionality in any new assessment, including the possibility of establishing a set of minimum essentials that all claimants should be allowed to get in place before any conditionality is imposed. These essential guarantees could include stabilising any health issues, but could also include safe and stable housing, suitable childcare, bringing debts and arrears under control, and ensuring access to suitable transportation (all of which, the research showed, could pose practical and/or cognitive barriers to engaging in work-related activity).

As we discuss further below, the rolling back of conditionality and sanctioning for claimants would be necessary, in order for the opportunities of greater trust, openness and comprehensiveness of support to be realised. A potential detrimental scenario envisaged during the workshop was that conditionality could in fact be enhanced as a result of a more holistic approach to work capability. For example, if a wider set of circumstances were taken into consideration, might moves be made to mandate claimants to take up language classes, engage in financial counselling, or even to leave an abusive relationship, in order to 'overcome' their barriers?

Finally, concerns were expressed about the potential loss of legitimacy which both claimants and the system might face if assessment of capacity for work was expanded beyond a narrowly-defined focus on health. Ill health is, currently and historically, seen as the predominant socially acceptable reason for economic

## Findings from the workshop

inactivity and related financial support. Some stakeholders who worked closely with people with lived experience felt that there was a substantial risk of mental illness being delegitimised by a broader approach to conceptualising capacity for work. Their view was that mental illness needed to retain its centralised status among the wider range of work-limiting circumstances, so as to retain public and policy understanding of its validity and significance as a barrier to work. Another view was that de-centring health could inadvertently increase stigma for claimants. The current system of health-related assessment is seen by many people as a valid check on the distribution of public funds, and a more holistic approach might risk de-legitimising the process by bringing in more contentious barriers to accessing work.

## System-wide level

Opportunities at a system level were similarly focused around the improvements that would be seen from opening up more broad conversations that could result in individuals being directed towards more appropriate support. As noted above, workshop participants felt that a more holistic assessment of capacity for work would facilitate more open conversations between claimants and DWP staff, which would hopefully lead to improved trust in the DWP as an institution and ultimately better outcomes. The current lack of trust between claimants and the DWP exists as a significant barrier to change. Participants working in the third sector stressed that many of their clients are reluctant to engage with their offers of support, until they are convinced that services are independent and unconnected to the Jobcentre, and will not report back to their Work Coach.

Concerns were expressed that, in taking a wider range of barriers into consideration, assessment could become more subjective. Case law would become much more complex, given the wider scope of factors taken into account, as would processes to appeal decisions made by Work Coaches. Questions were raised regarding what factors an appeals process might consider, and what evidence it would accept.

## Findings from the workshop

Concerns were also expressed regarding the quality of reports produced as part of a more holistic assessment process. Given the range of barriers that many claimants face, participants questioned how best this could be recorded within a bureaucratic process. Participants noted that the current standard of reports is generally low, with assessors sticking rigidly to the framework they are provided with. One option discussed was allowing claimants to write their own summary of the barriers facing them and their goals and motivations, but some claimants might struggle with this.

Whilst discussing the possibilities opened up by a new form of assessment, participants raised the possibility of data sharing between public and third sector organisations as part of a holistic assessment process, which could be transformative if done correctly. A better understanding of the barriers claimants face could potentially result in better links with VCSE organisations which could help claimants address these barriers. Caution was expressed about related data protection issues, but it was felt that the opportunities surrounding multi-agency working might far outweigh the risks.

Questions were raised regarding public attitudes and political considerations relating to any new form of assessment. Participants felt that public buy-in would be difficult if conditionality was significantly scaled back. Political risks were identified regarding the possibility of increased fraud within the system.

Participants also flagged operational concerns surrounding DWP capacity. In the short-term, demand may spike as more individuals attempt to seek assessments to reconsider their capacity for work under this new and more inclusive model. Under a more tailored and person-centred approach, claimants may also have lengthier conversations with Work Coaches where they lay out a number of different barriers to work beyond ill-health, placing pressures on frontline capacity. However, in the longer term, demand would likely decrease as cross-agency referrals and collaboration improved and individuals were signposted to specialist organisations where they became able to access better support to address these barriers.

## Findings from the workshop

Current issues with access to public services were also discussed. Claimants are often referred to other services only to encounter lengthy waiting lists. Holistic assessment would encourage claimants to identify and vocalise where public services were currently failing (including areas such as housing) and this would likely raise expectations from clients that they will receive help in accessing these services. Some participants noted that, whilst the current system of health-focused assessment results in a focus on individualised solutions (e.g. talking therapies for mental health problems), a holistic assessment would highlight inadequacies and under-resourcing elsewhere; this could be politically problematic.

## Session 2:

### **What might a holistic assessment look like?**

After assessing the opportunities and risks arising from a more holistic form of assessment, participants were encouraged to dive deeper and discuss what a new, less health-focused form of assessment would actually consist of. This raised key questions about the juxtaposition of more holistic approaches with conditionality and the question of who was well-placed to deliver such an assessment. The risk of re-traumatisation for claimants, issues around administration and documentation, and the challenge of public and political buy-in were also debated.

### **Inherent tensions between holistic assessment and conditionality**

When attempting to envisage how a holistic assessment might be implemented in practice, one of the key questions raised by workshop participants was whether the prospective more holistic assessment would be used as a basis for defining an appropriate package of work-related support (a novel objective), and/or as a categorisation mechanism for determining entitlements to benefit payments and levels of conditionality (i.e. the current function of

## Findings from the workshop

the WCA). There was consensus that doing both of these things simultaneously would likely prove very difficult.

Fundamentally, the core conclusion arising from the underpinning research was that capacity for work needs to be understood in a more holistic manner, as the current WCA clearly does not address the complex reality of the multiple interwoven barriers and constraints that affect most claimants' capacity for work. The WCA as currently configured does not address a real-world scenario for the majority of claimants, being limited to a decontextualised and abstracted discussion of exclusively health-related functional limitation. Workshop participants supported a move towards a more asset-based form of assessment, which would look at claimants' strengths as well as their support needs. A new form of assessment would essentially ask claimants 'What does appropriate work look like for you?' and work with claimants to move towards accessing appropriate work, rather than focusing purely on establishing the nature and extent of health-related functional limitation.

However, a shift to a more holistic and assets-based approach to assessing capacity for work has obvious ramifications for the WCA as currently designed, with its dual function of gatekeeping benefit levels and conditionality obligations. As already stated, it would likely be very difficult, and require radical redesign of both structures and processes, to decouple the assessment of capacity for work from the role of the WCA in determining financial and behavioural conditionality.

### Who would deliver a more holistic assessment?

A prompt given to the workshop participants was 'who is best placed to deliver this kind of more holistic assessment?' Participants could not agree on whether or not this role would require a basic level health qualification. Frontline practitioners participating in the workshop had a wide range of backgrounds, including clinical and non-clinical, and these differences may have shaped their perspectives on this point.

## Findings from the workshop

The question of devolving assessment of work capacity entirely to the frontline of Jobcentres was also debated. It was acknowledged that, if the more holistic form of assessment became part of the Work Coach role, this would constitute a significant change. Work Coaches would be expected to develop a broader range of skills in order to elicit, understand and support claimants facing a broader range of issues.

Returning to questions of relationality and trust, it was felt that the current model, where claimants only see Work Coaches for short periods of time, prohibited the development of trusting relationships between claimants and coaches. This could prove another obstacle to Work Coaches taking on a greater role in the initial assessment of capacity for work. Several workshop participants had experience working in services which used a 'keyworker' model that linked service users to a consistent member of frontline staff, with whom they were able to develop a continued, long-term relationship of trust and support. The current model within Jobcentres has generalist Work Coaches attempting to engage and support claimants with a range of circumstances and needs, with limited time to spend getting to know any given claimant. The result can be that they struggle to provide tailored, person-centred and expert support to claimants encountering multiple barriers to work.

Participants debated in the possibility (and related tensions and resource implications) of simultaneously carrying out assessments and delivering support. Under a new model of assessment, the principal focus of the Work Coach's time with the claimant could be gathering evidence, rather than making an immediate decision on support or conditionality. Their role might become more one of 'triage' than of monitoring or surveillance.

More generally, participants were critical of the current culture within Jobcentres, and felt that poor morale among Work Coaches was not conducive to high quality support and signposting. Based on their professional encounters with Work Coaches, workshop participants perceived that people entered the role for a variety of reasons – some were motivated by a desire to help people enter employment, some saw themselves more in terms of guardianship of the public purse.



## Findings from the workshop

The physical environment of many Jobcentres was discussed as an issue in terms of culture, and it was felt that more pleasant waiting areas and less focus on security would help both Work Coaches and claimants.

### Re-traumatisation

It was felt that a more holistic approach to assessing capacity for work would be useful and productive for claimants and Work Coaches to get a clear sense of all the barriers that are being encountered by an individual, but concerns were raised around potential re-traumatisation associated with conveying an extensive and wide-ranging account of current (and potentially historic) challenges relating to work capacity<sup>6</sup>. If assessment and triaging was devolved to Work Coaches, potential risks to Work Coaches' wellbeing were also raised, as claimants' barriers to work may include difficult and emotionally challenging topics, which Work Coaches would then have to engage with and address on a daily basis. Participants also discussed the need for safeguarding to feature in any new, more comprehensive assessment, as a holistic discussion presents potentially more opportunities for disclosure of harm compared to an assessment focused purely on health.

### Administration and documentation

There was some discussion regarding what a 'holistic assessment form' might look like, if claimants were to be encouraged to list all the barriers to work they encounter. Given the range of barriers identified in the research (see Appendix 1), a form which attempts to list all of these would be quite lengthy. There was a suggestion of electronic routing, which would help prevent claimants getting frustrated by irrelevant questions. Participants discussed asking claimants to rank the barriers they faced, so that the most important could be dealt with first. Semi-structured interviews were suggested as a way to conduct the process, a method that was generally well-received among claimants in an earlier trial conducted on behalf of DWP.<sup>7</sup>



## Findings from the workshop

### Public and political buy-in

It was recognised that not all barriers or constraints will be accepted by the public as appropriate or legitimate reasons to be exempted from work-related conditionality. As an example, some research participants listed the need to shape their day around attending to the needs of their pets as a constraint on the amount and type of work they could do. It was felt by workshop participants that a system which acknowledged a very inclusive scope of barriers to work would struggle to gain public and political buy-in. To an extent, this is a question of framing – a specific exemption from conditionality for pet-owners would likely be unacceptable, whereas a broad approach to ‘reasonable grounds’ for non-conditionality would likely be more acceptable. In some ways, this comes back to the opportunities and risks of discretionary approaches to determining conditionality. More fundamentally, however, it is rooted in the key question of whether assessment of capacity for work should be about delineating obligations and sanctions, or finding a productive, appropriate and feasible pathway towards sustainable employment.

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# Conclusion

## Conclusion

### Decentring conditionality

The thorniest problem at the heart of the workshop discussion is that the WCA is not only an assessment of functional barriers to work, but is also the determiner of work-related conditionality (and related sanctions). As one workshop participant summed up, the critical obstacle to reforming the WCA in the way our research proposes is that a more holistic version of the WCA only works if it is an assessment for employment support. If it continues to be an assessment based around money and conditionality then, in the words of the participant, “none of this works”.

Participants raised the fundamental issue that any assessment which foregrounds conditionality and determines claimants’ incomes will inevitably struggle to accurately, openly and supportively assess the barriers facing claimants. De-centring health and bringing into frame a wider range of work-related constraints in the assessment process would not necessarily produce better outcomes, if the process remained dominated by fear of loss of income and the imposition of unfeasible mandatory activity. Only by de-risking assessment and ensuring that claimants do not view it as ‘all or nothing’ can a better system come into existence.

Several participants felt that the rolling back of conditionality and sanctioning would be a necessary prerequisite for an effective new system of holistic assessment. Others felt that a raise in the basic rate of Universal Credit and a more functional system surrounding Personal Independence Payment would be necessary in order to ensure that claimants can fully engage with a better, more supportive WCA. At the time of writing, these are still very much live issues for the current government. We hope the outputs of this stakeholder workshop, and the wider research project findings, make a constructive contribution to this unfolding area of policy change.

### Summary

Participants at the workshop saw significant value in the possibility of a new, more holistic form of assessment of capacity for work. While the shift away from the current health-centric WCA would

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require both time and resource, as well as significant cultural change within Jobcentres, it was seen as having potential to produce benefits to claimant experience and outcomes, which justified this investment in doing things differently.

It was felt that the current WCA fails to accurately reflect claimants' circumstances, and that any new form of assessment should centre claimants' perceptions of their own lives and the full, multifaceted and interconnected range of constraints and contingencies that keep them from accessing appropriate work. Ultimately a new form of assessment which de-centres health and invites in 'whole story' understandings of claimants' lives could result in improved trust between claimants and the system, a better view of the health and non-health barriers to work which confront claimants, and better outcomes as claimants are able to progress with support towards overcoming those barriers.

# Acknowledgements

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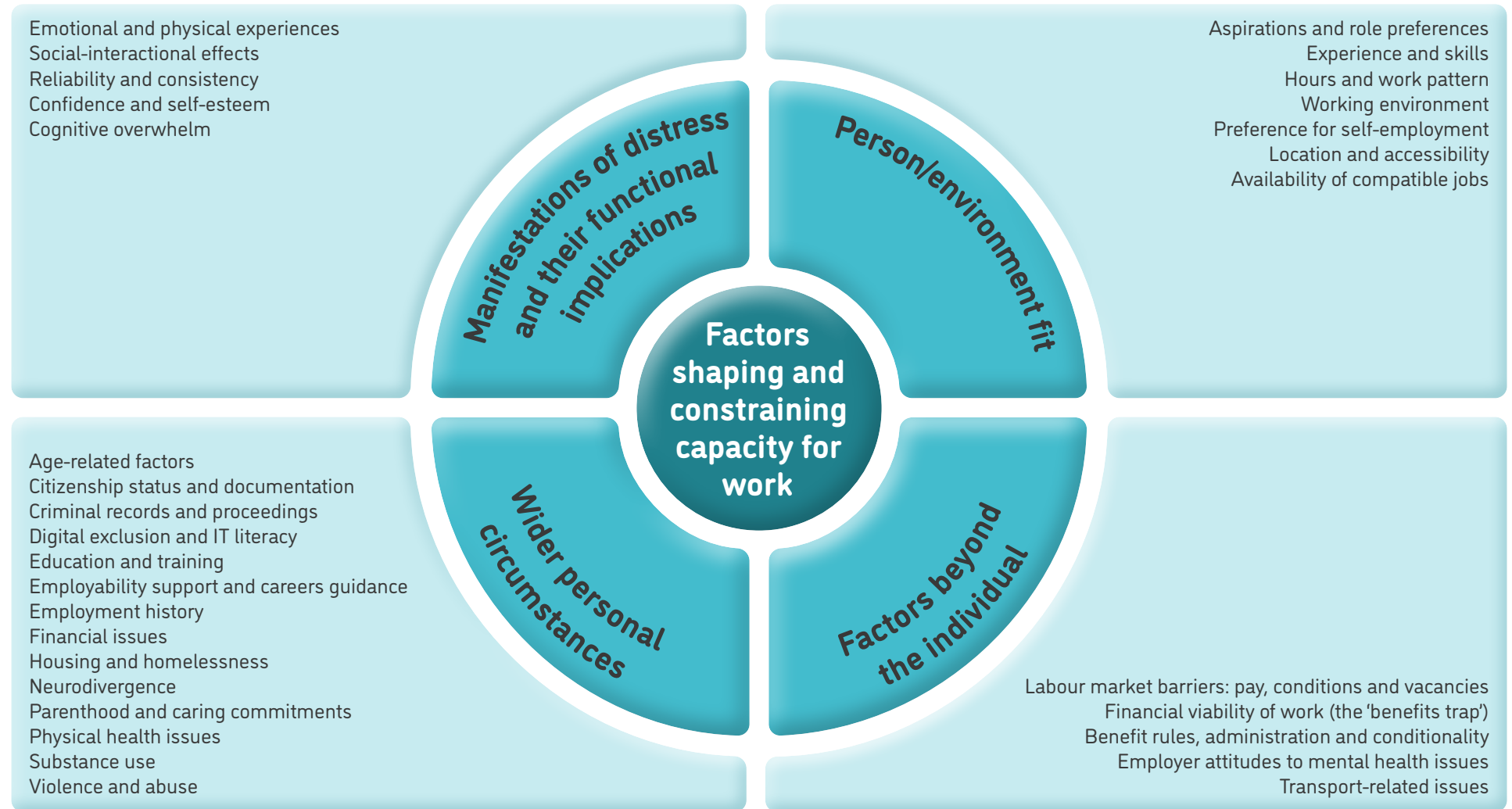
The Welcond dataset is held in the Timescapes Archive at the University of Leeds.

WelCond data set identifier: <https://doi.org/10.23635/13>

# Appendix

## Appendix

**Figure 1. Factors shaping and constraining capacity for work: perspectives of claimants with experience of mental distress**





# Endnotes

## Endnotes

- 1 The Welfare Conditionality Study 2013–2019. For details: <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/>
- 2 DWP (2025) *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper*. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pathways-to-work-reforming-benefits-and-support-to-get-britain-working-green-paper>
- 3 Irvine, A., Lovelock, C., Lawson, G., Pollitt, A. and Glaser, K. (2025). *Understanding Mental Health in the UK Welfare System: Insights from a secondary analysis of qualitative longitudinal research*. London: ESRC Centre for Society and Mental Health. [URL TBC](#)
- 4 Welfare Conditionality Project (2018) Final Findings Report. University of York, UK. Available: <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications/final-findings-report/>
- 5 Whilst the ESRC Centre for Society and Mental Health is committed to involving people with lived experience throughout its activities, after careful consideration it was felt that this particular forum could not simultaneously meet its objectives of critical policy deliberation whilst also guaranteeing a safe psychological space.
- 6 Even with a singular focus on health alone, the (re)traumatising effect of relaying functional impairments during the WCA is often noted in research on claimant experiences.
- 7 Department for Work & Pensions (2013) *Evidence Based Review of the Work Capability Assessment: A study of assessments for Employment and Support Allowance*. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/work-capability-assessment-evidence-based-review>



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