



**Organise  
members respond:**

**Benefit levels  
in the UK**

**April 2023**

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**Organise is a network of workers from all sectors of the economy, supporting each other to get better pay, conditions and recognition at work.**

This people-powered report is made up of the responses of thousands of Organise members who have engaged with various campaigns on the benefits system in the UK.

The benefits system has long been a contentious issue, with opinions divided on its effectiveness, fairness, and impact on people's lives. This report will examine the personal experiences of individuals who have interacted with the benefits system, specifically those who have experienced benefit sanctions or had their benefits reduced.

It aims to bring together a snapshot of the British public's experiences, views, and voices calling on the government for change. Through the testimonies shared below, we gain insight into the devastating impact that benefit sanctions can have on people's physical and mental health, their financial stability, and their ability to access basic necessities. The report will also explore the difficulties faced by those with disabilities and chronic health conditions in navigating the benefits system, including long waiting times and complex rules. By providing a platform for these voices to be heard, this report aims to shed light on the real-world implications of the UK's benefits system and to inspire constructive dialogue on how it can be improved to better serve those who rely on it.

## Section 1: The human impact of benefit sanctions

Over the last month, 2,173 Organise members have been sharing their experiences of claiming benefits. [1] Organise members have expressed a lot of issues with the UK's benefits system. They find filling out the forms challenging due to the complicated wording and sheer number of questions and many feel that they are being caught out deliberately.

Members with hidden disabilities find it challenging to explain their conditions to assessors, and the process can be invasive, personal, and upsetting. Some also report being treated poorly by staff and feel that they are made to feel like criminals, despite being genuinely unwell. The lengthy waiting times for decisions and the constant need to prove their illnesses is causing stress and trauma, which the system seems indifferent to.

### Top lines:

- ☛ 78% said they had difficulties or challenges applying for benefits.
- ☛ 89% said that the current system of benefits doesn't adequately meet the needs of those who rely on it.
- ☛ 76% have felt stigmatised or judged by others for being on benefits

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### **Please find below some quotations from Organise members on their experiences of applying for benefits:**

*"Within days of spinal surgery, I had to travel for re-assessment. It was a hideous experience. I was treated like a criminal and insulted to my face. I was rejected and I became stressed, anxious, paranoid and reclusive. Funds were cut off without notice and for 18 months I was living hand to mouth until a tribunal overturned the DWP's decision. Another re-assessment approaching. Hideous, cruel and unnecessary as I have an incurable condition and I will never get better."*

*"My first application failed to succeed at the first stage, then after requesting a consideration of the decision, then at a lower tribunal, then the upper tribunal sent my application to be heard back at the lower tribunal, who then refused any award of benefit again! During the years it took to go through all those stressful processes, the benefit I was claiming no longer existed and was replaced with a different one. I then applied for the new benefit and was awarded the highest rates. The decision process is so arbitrary. Also, my advocate (the head of welfare benefits at Mind in Enfield) was so shocked at how the lower tribunal treated me throughout their aggressive questioning, that she wrote to make a complaint. She said never in her decades of advocacy, had she witnessed such appalling behaviour. I was very traumatised by this and the whole process."*

*"The form for Employment and Support Allowance was exhausting to fill out and traumatic to need to consider all of your health problems and the impact they have on your life in such detail."*

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### **The impact on mental health:**

The benefits system in the UK has a negative impact on the mental health of those who rely on it. The system creates stress, anxiety, and depression in claimants, with many feeling judged, humiliated, and constantly under threat of sanctions or miscalculations. Claimants often struggle to make ends meet, leading to poverty, debt, and a low sense of worth. While some feel that the benefits they receive have improved their quality of life, many report feeling like they are just surviving rather than living. The fear of being transferred to Universal Credit and the constant struggle to pay bills also contributes to poor mental health. The negative impact on mental health is particularly acute during reassessments, with many claimants experiencing a significant worsening of their depression.

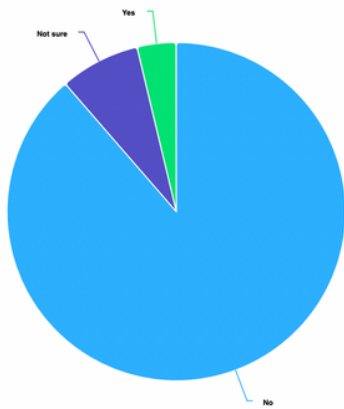
### **What members are saying:**

*"The appeal process for PIP is stressful and stacked against you if you don't fill out the form in the best way. Adding to stress, and making you feel somewhat as if you are a cheat, or unworthy."*

*"I claim on behalf of my disabled husband. The process of switching him from DLA to PIP as well as caring for and working was too much. My health has broken down and I can no longer work nor really adequately care for my husband."*

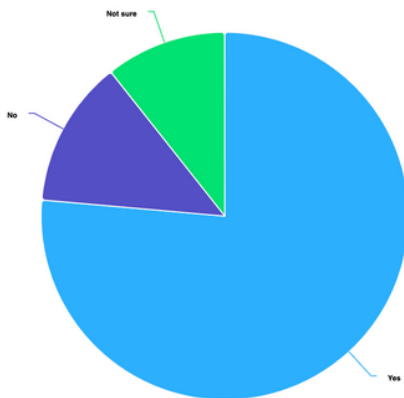
*"It's depressing. We also know that the slightest mistake could result in a sanction or miscalculation."*

Do you feel that the current system of benefits adequately meets the needs of those who rely on it?



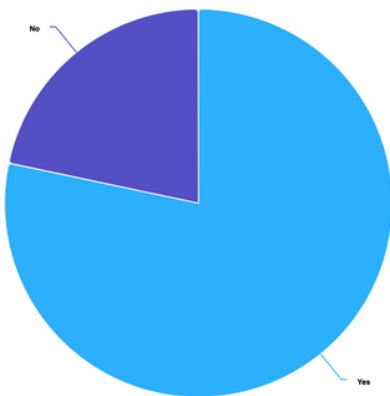
Answer	# Respondents	% of respondents
No	1714	89
Not sure	148	8
Yes	72	4

Have you ever felt stigmatised or judged by others for being on benefits?



Answer	# Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	1470	76
No	249	13
Not sure	205	11

Have you ever experienced any difficulties or challenges when applying for benefits?



Answer	# Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	1532	78
No	424	22

# 4

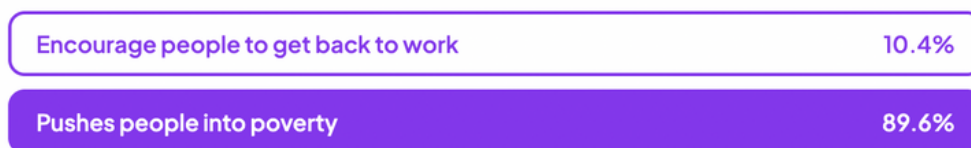
## Section 2: Tell the UK government: Benefit sanctions don't work petition

7,828 Organise members signed the petition to say that benefit sanctions do not work. [2] Studies have shown that they do not increase the likelihood of finding work, and can actually make it harder for people to find employment. In addition, sanctions can cause significant financial hardship, with many individuals and families being pushed into poverty as a result.

The current system of sanctions is fundamentally unfair. Sanctions are often applied without warning or explanation, and many people are not given a fair opportunity to challenge the decision. This can lead to individuals and families being unfairly penalised, with no recourse to justice.

**88% of Organise members agree that benefit sanctions push people into poverty rather than encouraging them to get back to work. [3]**

**What effect do you think benefits sanctions have? (average fine is £660 issued to claimants as punishment for infringing benefit conditions)**



2246 votes • Thank you for voting!

## 5

### Organise member's experiences of benefit sanctions: [4]

"My partner's bike broke which made him miss an appointment. They instantly closed our claim. We had 2 children and I was 7 months pregnant. I went without food most of the month while pregnant and my children ate basic meals. I missed several hospital appointments due to not being able to afford to go and we then had to apply for an advance when they re-opened our claim which has put us in financial hardship paying back every month."

"The impact on me was devastating. It left me feeling so depressed, sad and upset. I knew that this was not right so I appealed their decision which took me years. All through this whole process I was struggling with my physical health and mental health."

"I lost a week's worth of benefits and I had to sell things to eat, exacerbating my serious mental health and a suicide attempt that ended in ICU, very sorry I survived."

"It had a very bad impact. I struggle with the little I get as it is and to be sanctioned makes it even harder to get by in life without the money they take away from you I've gone days and weeks without food just so my son could have food."



## 5 key policy recommendations:

- Increase the amount of benefits with the cost of living to help people to live, not just survive.
- The benefits system should be re-designed and based on actual medical conditions, confirmed by medical professionals.
- The government should make the benefits application process easier and less intimidating, with less judgmental staff.
- Provide more help for people on benefits for mental health issues.
- Remove for-profit companies from the benefits administration, and nationalise the administration of the benefits system for more transparency and accountability.

## Summary:

The UK benefits system has faced widespread criticism for failing to meet the needs of its beneficiaries. Many report experiencing financial and emotional distress due to benefit sanctions and cuts, which have left them struggling to make ends meet. Some have even had to rely on others to help them pay for essentials like food and rent just to survive. In addition, there are concerns about the impact of changes to the benefits system on those with disabilities and those caring for others. Such experiences highlight the urgent need for the UK government to reevaluate the benefits system and ensure that it adequately supports those who rely on it.

The system is dehumanising, cruel, and obstructive. Beneficiaries have reported poor treatment from job centre staff, long waiting times, and unfair assessments. Some have had their benefits cut off or lost for an extended period, and others have been offered unsuitable, poorly paid jobs or no job at all. The judgments made by the benefits system are said to be based more on cost than need, leading to a judgmental approach to claimants. Many are calling for more compassionate treatment, person-centered training for staff, and a more humane and sympathetic assessment process.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report.  
These quotations have been anonymously shared by  
people in the Organise Network.

To respond to this report, please contact Roxana Khan-  
Williams at [roxana@organise.network](mailto:roxana@organise.network)

**Notes:**

[1] Organise survey: *The human impact of benefit sanctions*  
<https://the.organise.network/surveys/1513/results>

[2] Organise petition: *Tell the UK government: Benefit sanctions  
don't work* [https://the.organise.network/campaigns/network-tell-  
the-uk-government-benefit-sanctions-don-t-work-  
704199d922fab4be](https://the.organise.network/campaigns/network-tell-the-uk-government-benefit-sanctions-don-t-work-704199d922fab4be)

[3] Organise poll: *What effect do you think benefits sanctions have?  
(average fine is £660 issued to claimants as punishment for  
infringing benefit conditions)*  
[https://organise.network/dashboard/poll-what-effect-do-you-think-  
benefits-s-1hvQWvsN](https://organise.network/dashboard/poll-what-effect-do-you-think-benefits-s-1hvQWvsN)

[4] Organise survey: *The human impact of benefit sanctions*  
<https://the.organise.network/surveys/1513/results>

