

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK?

Annie Makoff goes behind the headlines to find out what's actually happening with the government's much publicised work initiatives...

Slave labour. A violation of human rights. Exploitation. These are just some of the terms used by disabled people to describe how they feel about the government's unpaid work schemes.

Perhaps it's not surprising. Stories abound in the press and on social media networks about the 'reality' of the Back to Work programmes, which are seeing hundreds of thousands of jobseekers working for free under threat of sanctions.

In fact, a recent high court ruling – the first of its kind – found that the Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) Back to Work sanctions, which halt benefits for up to six months, were 'unlawful', though the scheme itself was found not to have breached human rights.

Yet despite the bad press, the government recently announced its decision to extend one of the most controversial schemes, the Mandatory Work Activity scheme – otherwise known by its critics as 'workfare'. The scheme's expansion means that eligibility will be extended to disabled people placed in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG), following a work capability assessment.

Cause for concern

The move has concerned several campaign groups – not least because the WRAG now includes cancer patients, as well as other sick and disabled people who have been found fit for work, despite having chronic health conditions.

Boycott Workfare, a UK-wide

campaign aimed at ending forced unpaid work for people on benefits, is one such group. Boycott Workfare member Joanna Long is deeply concerned about the issue of forced work. Not just because it could replace paid work, but because she sees it as a form of exploitation.

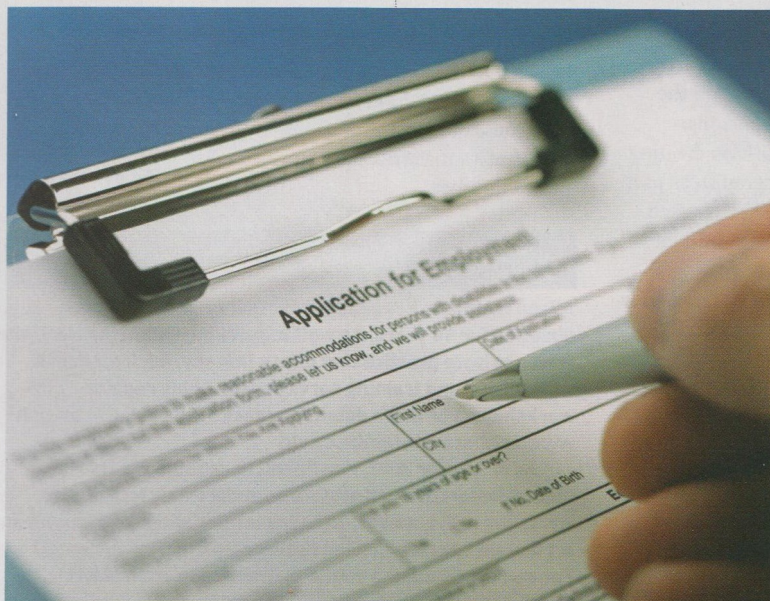
"People are forced to work without pay on threat of having their benefits stopped. For many, there is the threat of destitution if they do not take part," she says. "Some schemes far exceed the maximum community service sentence, whilst multi-million pound companies benefit from free labour."

According to Joanna and a report in *The Guardian* earlier this year, disabled people are being fast-tracked onto the Work Programme with no set time limit on the work placements.

Linda Burnip, founder of the campaign group Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), is also worried. "Chris Grayling has made it quite plain that disabled people would be subjected to unlimited and unpaid work placements, whereas non-disabled people's placements would be capped at two weeks," she says. "It's going to be those with invisible disabilities like autism, ME or fibromyalgia who will be most affected, because they are the ones who will be moved from ESA [Employment Support Allowance] to the Work Related Activity Group."

Speaking out

It's not just campaigning groups who are disturbed by the schemes. *Disability* has spoken to several



disabled people who are too scared to use their real names, but who wanted to speak out.

One woman with severe mental health issues was recently found fit to work and has been placed on the Work Programme under threat of benefit sanctions, whilst a disabled couple based in Manchester are petrified of their future. 'Liam' says that he and his wife – both chronically disabled – now fear the arrival of their postman because "He may drop a brown DWP envelope through the door". Liam describes the government's Back to Work schemes as "Unjustifiable and inhumane".

Another disabled woman, 'Kate', who has a 4-year-old daughter, fought against the DWP's decision to place her in the WRAG, even though the Department's own guidance states that mothers with children under five are exempt.

Visually-impaired 'Kyle' was actually placed in a precursor to the Work Programme a few years ago, but fears nothing has changed. A fully qualified IT professional, he was sent to the services provider A4E in 2009 to support him back to work, but according to Kyle, they did anything but.

"They stopped me seeing [*the national charity*] Action for Blind People, who had been really helpful," he recalls. "They refused to reimburse me for my travel, despite my being on benefits, and insisted on me signing various documents that I couldn't see, even though I asked for them to be in large print. Each time I went for an appointment they kept asking if I was a drug user."

Despite cooperating fully, Kyle was repeatedly threatened with benefit sanctions and told that if he didn't go on a mandatory work placement longer than the advised four weeks his benefits would be stopped. "They belittled and humiliated me at every opportunity. They even stopped me from doing other training courses. Rather than help people, they put them in a bad place emotionally and physically."

Talk of targets

Even a member of staff working for a private contractor carrying out the government's Work Programme scheme spoke to us anonymously about their doubts with the various programmes. 'Adam' says he has become so disillusioned by the Back to Work scheme that he is looking to change careers altogether.

"Work Choice is a small-scale offshoot from the current Work Programme," he explains. "It was set up to help disabled people get back in to work, but because of staff targets, it doesn't help them at all. It's become a programme where staff are having to cherry-pick the easiest people to get into work, otherwise our contract will be terminated."

Adam says that staff targets mean those who need the most support – those with learning disabilities, for example – are not accepted on the programme and are falling by the wayside.

"Staff are under pressure from the DWP to refuse those who are further from the job market. We just don't have the time or the flexibility to support those who need it most."

Due to a lack of support for those with serious disabilities, Adam is concerned that schemes like the Mandatory Work Activity will have serious consequences. "They are the ones more likely to be exploited," he explains. "Those who need the most support will be the ones left to cope, so putting these kinds of people on workfare schemes is absolutely beyond contempt."

Steven Preece from the Social Welfare Union, a campaigning group supporting people on benefits, agrees. "Mandating people with disability or long-term sickness to work schemes is absolutely wrong," he says. "They should never be 'coaxed' onto these schemes with threats of benefit sanctions, as the income they receive from disability and sickness benefits is crucial to their ability to live life independently."

Personal discretion

The DWP, however, disputes claims that their work programmes are in any way exploitative. "These schemes are not slave labour, that is simply wrong," insists DWP spokesperson Kirsty Welch. "If someone has been found fit for work they can sign on for JSA [Jobseekers' Allowance], and would be subject to a job-seeking agreement. They will work with a personal adviser to set out their job goals and how they can work towards employment."

She adds: "People can be asked to undertake Mandatory Work Activity at the discretion of their Jobcentre Personal Adviser. Only people on JSA would be asked to undertake this scheme and it is certainly not for everyone. Workfare does not exist."

Works in Progress

The government employment initiatives currently running and what they involve

Work Experience Scheme

Aimed at: young people between the ages of 16 and 25 who have been unemployed for three to nine months

Duration: two to eight weeks, 30 hours per week

Offers: Unpaid work placement to improve CV and gain experience

Status: Participation is voluntary, but once signed up, benefits may be stopped for two weeks if placement is not completed.

The Work Programme

Aimed at: Those at risk of long-term unemployment

Duration: Unlimited

Offers: Support finding work, training or work placements, paid or unpaid

Status: Voluntary, but benefit sanctions can be given if support is refused or if placements aren't finished.

Mandatory Work Activity

Aimed at: Those at risk of long-term unemployment

Duration: six to eight weeks, 30 hours per week

Offers: Unpaid work placement to improve CV and gain experience

Status: Compulsory. 13-week benefit sanctions if support is refused or placements finish early. 26-week benefit sanctions if a second placement falls through.

Community Activity Programme (currently being piloted)

Aimed at: Those at risk of long-term unemployment.

Duration: Up to six months, 30 hours per week.

Offers: Unpaid work placement to improve CV and gain experience with job search support and supervision.

Status: Compulsory, with same benefit sanctions as Mandatory Work Activity.

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