

From stigma to support

Rebuilding trust in our social security system.



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About Turn2us

Turn2us is a national charity offering information and practical help to people facing financial insecurity. We know that many people struggle to access the social security support they are entitled to because of stigma, misinformation, or complex processes.

Our Benefits Calculator and Grants Search tools show users what support they are entitled to. In 2024-25 we made grants of over £3.3 million supporting 2,277 people across the UK. 2.4 million people used the tool in that period. Of those, 1.5 million people found new benefits they're entitled to, worth an average of £5,396 each.

This amounts to £12.9 billion in annual benefits income that would otherwise go unclaimed. To support people to access PIP, we developed the Turn2us PIP Helper tool with those in receipt of PIP, to simplify the complex application process, making it more accessible and less daunting.

People facing financial insecurity play a core role within Turn2us and are at the centre of our policy and decision-making.

Their expertise and insights shape our work, ensuring that our tools, programmes and policies are relevant, meaningful and free from stigma.

About Stigma in the System

This report's recommendations are based on the findings of *Stigma in the System* – a report released in September 2025 from the University of Bristol's Personal Finance Research Centre. Commissioned by Turn2us and generously funded by Royal London as part of a long-term strategic relationship, this research explores how stigma shapes experiences of the UK social security system.

Using secondary data analysis, qualitative interviews, and a nationally representative YouGov survey of 4000 people, this research examines how stigma is produced, reinforced, and experienced in the UK social security system; how it shapes perceptions and behaviours; and what this means for financial security and wellbeing.

It explores its drivers, its impact on both claimants and non-claimants, and the changes needed to create a system that supports people with dignity and fairness.

The University of Bristol Personal Finance Research Centre is an interdisciplinary research centre exploring the financial issues that affect individuals and households, with a particular focus on low-income, marginalised or vulnerable groups.

The full research can be found on the [University of Bristol website](#).

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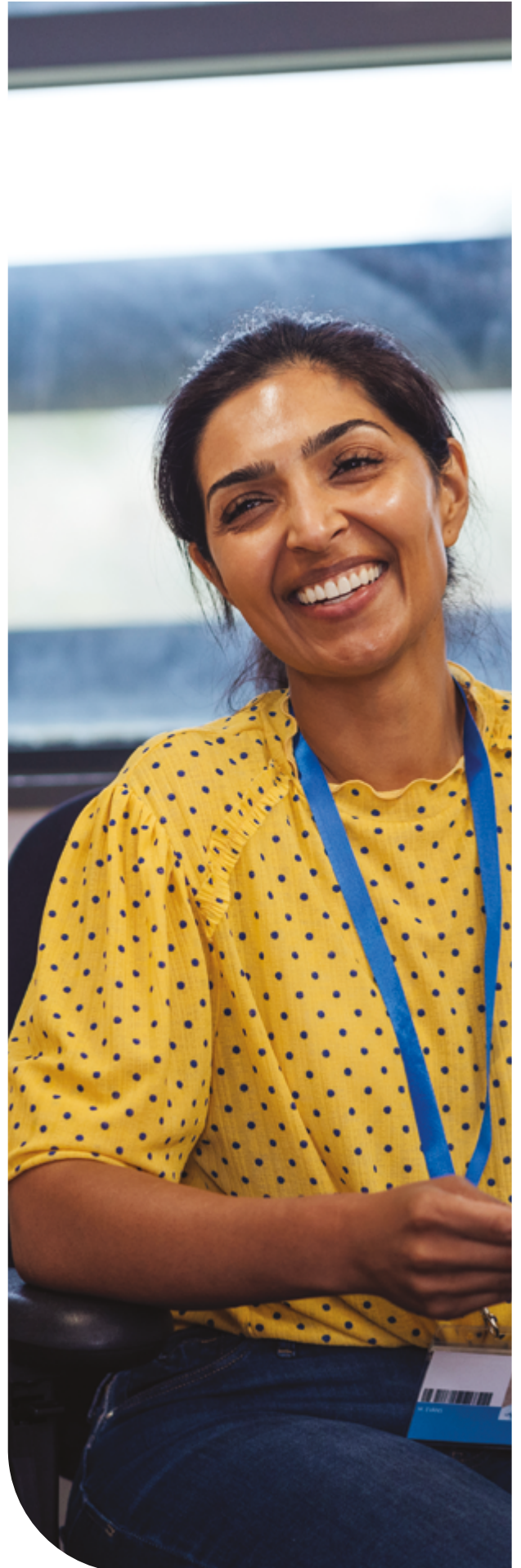
Executive summary

Almost all of us will need the social security system at some point in our lives. It was designed to be our safety net if we become unwell or our employers go under. It is there when we retire, and should ensure we're still able to feed our families if we are paid too little or we face additional costs due to disability.

However, at the moment, rather than providing the support people need to get back on track, it often makes difficult times even harder. In September 2025, we released research with the University of Bristol, showing how our society's stigma (distrust and negative views of benefits and claimants) has been baked into its design. This means, at the point when we most need support, we are treated with suspicion and contempt. Not only is this hugely harmful to people, but it also makes the system error-prone, inefficient and ineffective.

In its *Get Britain Working* White Paper and *Pathways to Work* Green Paper, the government set out plans to reform employment support and health and disability benefits. The common goal for its various reforms is to support more people to move into, and progress in, work.¹

In its diagnosis and solutions, the government recognises the need to move away from Jobcentres focusing on monitoring claimants and set out ambitions for genuine skills and careers support. It acknowledges that many people are scared to try work, because they fear losing support, and are legislating for a 'right to try' guarantee.² The government rightly condemns the negative experience people have when applying for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and has committed to co-produce a review to improve the PIP assessment.



64%

of claimants surveyed felt the system was trying to catch them out.

However, there is a real risk that the government fails to recognise the extent to which stigma – baked into the design of the system and in the government's language – is eroding trust and pushing people further from employment. The *Stigma in the System* research found that:

- A culture of surveillance and the threat of sanctions are eroding trust in work coaches. 64% of claimants surveyed felt the system was trying to catch them out.
- ‘Soul destroying’ PIP assessments are worsening claimants’ mental health and 80% of PIP claimants regularly fear their critical support will be taken away.
- Frustrating processes are demoralising and leave people feeling ‘hopeless’. Being spoken ‘down to’ means people leave the Jobcentre feeling small.
- Headlines of politicians describing the system as ‘unsustainable’ and talking of ‘spiralling economic inactivity’³ to justify major cuts, is reducing trust in the government’s intentions and increasing fears that support will be taken away.

To fix the system, we need to start with the stigma that is pervasive throughout it. There is a lot that this government can learn from Social Security Scotland, who have put the values of dignity, fairness and respect at the heart of the delivery and are using a trauma-informed approach across all its services. Whilst the new Adult Disability Payment, which has replaced PIP, is not without its problems, our co-production partners in Scotland have reported much more positive experiences of the system.

Rebuilding trust, boosting confidence and treating people with dignity and respect will be critical to delivering a sustainable system that helps more people to progress and move into work.

1. Transforming PIP: From interrogation to dignified support

Our *Stigma in the System* research found the process of accessing Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to be ‘*the most problematic and unhappy part of applying for benefits*’ with 64% of current PIP claimants saying that the process made their mental health worse.

The application and assessment are difficult and emotionally draining. The points-based system requires claimants to focus on their worst days and the most debilitating aspects of their conditions. Claimants often have extensive medical evidence, only for that to be dismissed by assessors. This experience of suspicion and mistrust is both cruel and ineffective. 67% of unsuccessful claims taken to tribunal are overturned in favour of the claimant, and these delays to accessing support often lead to significant financial hardship and debt.

The government has set out plans to scrap the Work Capability Assessment in Universal Credit, instead using the PIP assessment to determine eligibility for any health-related financial support.⁴ This makes ensuring that the PIP assessment is robust and fair even more important. But further, the government’s overarching ambition—supporting people to work—is being held back by a PIP assessment that makes people sicker and is entirely focused on proving what people cannot do.

“ People feel their assessors are trying to catch them out and actively misrepresent what happens in assessments. ”

Over the next year, the Timms Review will review the role, criteria, and scope of the PIP assessment. We have welcomed the government’s commitment to co-producing the review with disabled people, and organisations that represent them, and we look forward to engaging in this process. However, based on our insights from the Turn2us PIP Helper and our research, there are specific issues that we recommend the Timms Review consider.

We recommend that the Timms Review considers:



- Learning from Social Security Scotland and exploring where PIP can replicate the Adult Disability Payment system, particularly around reducing the number of assessments and, where assessments are necessary, improving their quality.
- As a critical aspect of an effective assessment, how the PIP application can be made easier to complete.
- PIP assessors receive training that gives them a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between disability and ill health. This would allow them to be less rigid in their assessment and make more nuanced judgements about claimants rather than being prescriptive.

2. Building trust in the DWP: a foundation for effective engagement

Our research demonstrates that most people approach the DWP with significant levels of shame due to societal stigma around people claiming benefits. Work coach and assessor language and actions can either help overcome this internalised stigma—building confidence and allowing people to succeed—or further reinforce it, leading to worsening mental health, reduced confidence and disempowerment.

Effectively assessing the support someone needs to navigate life with a disability, or a health condition, depends on developing a thorough understanding of their unique circumstances, support networks, goals, and the barriers they face. But right now, the lack of trust in assessors and the robustness or fairness of the process makes such open and trusting conversations impossible. Claimants feel their assessors are trying to catch them out and actively misrepresent what happens in assessments. To help people to return to employment after a setback or progress in work, work coaches need to build people’s confidence, self-esteem and support their future goals. This requires a skilful building of trust and effective coaching.

However, claimants feel that they are being scrutinised, belittled and judged by work coaches. Security guards at Jobcentre doors, a lack of privacy, and screens between claimants and work coaches make the space feel punitive and controlling. The government also needs to address the shortage of work coaches as short appointments and high workloads make it impossible to build trusting relationships with claimants.

“ Stigma towards claimants and distrust of the DWP makes it impossible for the system to operate effectively or efficiently. ”



We recommend that the DWP:



- Turbocharge its Trauma-Informed Approach Integration Programme, including beginning the rollout of in-depth, comprehensive training for all work coaches and PIP assessors in trauma-informed conversations by the end of 2026.
- Reform Jobcentres and deliver wider employment support in welcoming, community-oriented spaces that prioritise personal support and build trust.
- Increase the duration of work coach appointments to allow for meaningful relationship building and to give work coaches the time to understand individual barriers to work and provide tailored support.

3. Ending surveillance: boosting confidence and hope

A constant focus on surveillance and threat of punishment in our benefits system has not worked. To support people into work, the system should be boosting people's confidence, self-esteem and hopes for their future. Prescriptive conditionality and sanctions treat people like children, reducing confidence and pushing people into financial crisis. Further, this approach does not lead to better employment outcomes. Exit rates from Universal Credit into PAYE employment decreases as a result of sanctions and tends to shift people towards lower-paying work.

Whilst there must be consequences for completely refusing to engage, most people want to work. There is no evidence that people who can work don't want to work, and the assumption that they don't is unhelpful to building trust and confidence. The Jobcentre's constant focus on checking that claimants are complying with their claimant commitment, means the threat of financial sanctions hangs over every engagement, demoralising claimants, increasing fear of the DWP and reducing trust in work coaches.

As the government rolls out more employment support to people with disabilities and health conditions, it risks failing to learn from the mistakes of past governments by relying on infantilising and prescriptive conditionality. Instead, we urge the government to focus on voluntary engagement by promoting genuinely useful employment support and rebuilding trust with claimants.

We recommend that the DWP:



- Adopt the New Economic Foundation's proposal to promote voluntary engagement for the first three months of a new claim, with the focus on building relationships and co-producing a plan. After that initial period, if there is no evidence of activity or process, a review should take place to explore barriers and decide if more prescriptive conditionality is required. If these requirements are still not met, a warning and a final review should take place before financial sanctions are imposed.

Stigma towards claimants and distrust of the DWP makes it impossible for the system to operate effectively or efficiently. Cuts to an already inadequate system, or combining increased employment support with prescriptive conditionality, ignores the lessons of the last 15 years. By justifying cuts to eligibility and adequacy by speaking of 'spiralling inactivity' and 'fairness to taxpayers', the government risks further entrenching the stigma, distrust and fear that has broken our system.

In contrast, by investing in frontline staff, Jobcentres and assessments, the system can be transformed into one that supports and enables people to get on with their lives. This will mean the system is able to both properly protect those who are unable to work and ensure those who can work are more quickly supported into work that meets their individual goals and ambitions.

Combined with government plans to reduce NHS waiting lists, improve mental health provision and ensure employers provide better support for people to stay in work, this will reduce the support needed from our social security system.

This won't happen overnight. Changing the

culture of Jobcentres and rebuilding trust with claimants will take some time. However, the potential savings are vast. The DWP's own modelling suggests that supporting someone with work-limiting health conditions or disabilities into full-time employment could lead to societal savings of £28,000 a year, including direct fiscal savings, tax revenue and wider economic impact.⁵

Therefore, it is easy to see how an effective work coach would pay for themselves very quickly, and bolsters the case for investment in this area.

Finally, politicians, the government and the media need to change the way they talk about our social security system. Almost all of us will need the system at some point in our lives, and our research found that 71% of the public agree that no one should feel ashamed for accessing the support they need.⁶ Yet 68% of claimants do. This deeply entrenched view comes from the narratives driven by politicians that demonise any spending on social security and talk of 'cracking down' on inactivity and 'benefit cheats', pushing grossly harmful misconceptions of widespread fraud or laziness. This not only leads to damaging and isolating shame but also drives mistrust in the DWP and undermines the government's intentions for reform. We urge parliamentarians to ensure the language they choose helps to build understanding about the role of our social security system and avoids fuelling harmful misconceptions and stigma. We recommend referring to our 'Talking About Social Security'⁷ guides.

A safety net that we can all trust to support us when we face tough times is critical to a functioning economy and society. By centring reforms around building trust and treating people with dignity and respect, the government has an opportunity to build a system we can all be proud of.

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Introduction

Stigma in the UK social security system refers to society's negative perceptions and attitudes towards people receiving welfare benefits. It's more than hurt feelings and has deep and measurable consequences for people. Historically, Britain has associated social assistance with shame, from the 'poor laws' and private charities to modern welfare policies. In some European countries such as Germany and Belgium, social security does not have this stigma attached. It is seen as a right and commonly included in written constitutions.

In 2013, Turn2us commissioned research into the stigma around the UK social security system. That research found stigma manifests predominantly as claimants feeling that other people around them see claiming benefits as shameful, particularly where others doubted their deservingness.⁸ Since that study, the social security landscape has evolved with the introduction of benefits such as Universal Credit (UC) and Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

In 2025 Turn2us, with the University of Bristol, conducted further research to understand how stigma operates in the social security system. Our *Stigma in the System* report (referred to as *Stigma in the System* from this point forward), revealed that most experiences of stigma stem from the design and delivery of the system. This has been influenced by societal stigma including from political and media narratives that reinforce notions of worthiness and deservingness. In polling conducted in early 2025, Turn2us found that just 6% of people feel politicians' language builds trust in the system and half of people claiming support said that media and politicians should speak about them more fairly.⁹

This led to Turn2us developing 'Talking About Social Security' guides¹⁰ for parliamentarians and the media. The guides aim to support better reporting, more informed debate, and a more compassionate conversation about the role of social security in all our lives, grounded in empathy, accuracy and respect.





We are working with organisations, in our sector and beyond, to change the narrative about our social security system, tackling misconceptions and building public understanding about the critical role it plays.

In its *Get Britain Working* White Paper and its *Pathways to Work* Green Paper, the government sets out plans to reform employment support and health and disability benefits. The common goal for the various reforms is to support more people to move into, and progress in work. In the government's diagnosis and solutions, it recognises the need to move away from Jobcentres focusing on monitoring claimants and acknowledging that many people are scared to try work, rightly condemning the negative experiences people have when applying for Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

However, there is a real risk that the government fails to recognise the extent to which stigma—baked into the design of the system and in the language—is eroding trust and pushing people further from employment. This report sets out our recommendations for government to enable them to remove the negative impact the system has on people and deliver on its stated goals.

Alongside the findings of *Stigma in the System*, to develop these recommendations we drew on extensive existing insights from the perspectives of people who have lived experience of the system and consulted five of our co-production partners, two of whom were involved throughout our partnership with the University of Bristol.

Further, in September 2025, we ran a workshop with DWP officials from across the department and our co-production partners. We are grateful for their feedback, which has significantly strengthened this report's recommendations.

To fix the system, we need to start with the stigma that is pervasive throughout it. A safety net that we can all trust to support us when we face tough times is critical to a functioning economy and society. Our recommendations focus on how the government can rebuild trust and ensure its reforms deliver a system that treats people with dignity and respect.

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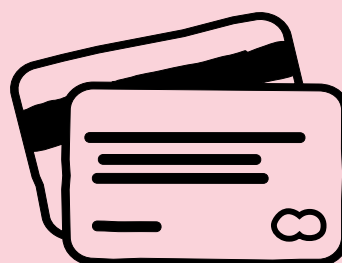
1. Transforming PIP: From interrogations to dignified support

The process of accessing Personal Independence Payment (PIP) was described by participants in *Stigma in the System* as ‘the most problematic and unhappy part of applying for benefits’ with 64% of current PIP claimants surveyed saying that the process of applying made their mental health worse.

Since its introduction in 2013, PIP has faced numerous problems that have made accessing the benefit challenging. This led to Turn2us working with people who have experience of navigating the PIP application process to co-produce Turn2us PIP Helper. The insights provided by partners allowed us to fully understand the challenges associated with applying for PIP, which were further highlighted by *Stigma in the System*.

To access PIP, claimants must first telephone the DWP to request the PIP2 Form, often facing wait times of up to an hour. They must then wait for the 50-page form to arrive in the post before completing it within four weeks.

Stigma in the System found that 82% of PIP claimants found it difficult to complete the application form. Claimants in the qualitative interviews said that the forms were long and it was unclear how to answer the questions. They described challenges in providing the additional evidence to support their claim. This led a number of claimants to abandon their applications.



What is PIP?

Personal Independence Payment was introduced in 2013, replacing Disability Living Allowance, to modernise the system and make it ‘more responsive’ to the needs of disabled people and enable people to ‘lead full, active and independent lives’.

These payments are designed to help people with a long-term health condition or disability that means they struggle doing everyday tasks, like preparing food, washing, or getting around.

It is not means tested, can be claimed while working and is made up of two components: daily living and mobility, each with a standard and an enhanced rate.

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... I think that [the third PIP application] tipped me over the edge. If you like, from being able to function with my mental health to a point whereby, you know, I was suicidal that point because I thought I just can't continue to fight every single time. And I think part of the issue was giving the same information every time.”

Stigma in the System Research Participant

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Research on improving PIP and Employment Support Allowance¹¹ conducted by the DWP found that people ‘felt that they included very personal and difficult experiences in their application forms and claimants were unsure if this information was used in assessing whether they were eligible for the benefit.’¹² DWP research found that many claimants found it difficult to know what DWP was ‘looking for’ and had concerns about providing the ‘right’ information.¹³

Through the Health Transformation Programme, the government is exploring how to improve the application. The programme is piloting online applications with the ambition of transforming the full PIP journey and creating a more user-friendly service, designed around the needs of claimants.¹⁴ The Programme aims to have online applications as standard and improve how a person’s health information is captured including changes in condition.

As well as a complicated form and the need for extensive medical evidence, applicants are then required to have an assessment either by telephone or in person. *Stigma in the System* found this assessment to be a consistently negative experience. To be eligible for PIP, claimants must score a certain number of points. To attain the necessary points they must explain to the assessor what they are like on their worst days and outline the most

debilitating aspects of their conditions. For many this was mentally draining, with claimants finding it difficult to be so negative about their lives and capabilities.

“... [it’s] soul destroying having to focus on what you can’t do.” Interview respondent

“They just scored no points on everything... It’s a point system and you have to have so many to get it and then more for if you give the enhanced rate. But this is what they do ... it’s just a tactic, I feel, just to delay and stop people carrying on because they know how stressful it is.” Stigma in the System participant

The design and delivery of the assessment do not fully recognise the complexity of living with multiple illnesses or disabilities, or the different ways these affect claimants. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to disability, and assessments should reflect this reality. The assessment is conducted by a health professional who is not necessarily a specialist in the condition or disability they are assessing and *Stigma in the System* found that one of the biggest frustrations about the process is people not feeling that their conditions are understood. Individuals often have extensive medical history and letters from doctors explaining their condition and needs, only for that to be scrutinised as potentially false evidence.

This experience of suspicion and mistrust is not only severely damaging for individuals, but it is an enormous waste of public funds and causes significant delays, with many initial assessments being rejected but then overturned at tribunal. Delays lead to significant financial hardship and debt for some claimants, as one adviser noted:

“It can be two years or so after the original claim, before the Tribunal award. They say ‘Well, they got their money’ but I say ‘yeah, you can’t go down to Sainsbury’s or whatever and said I’ll pay in two years’ time when I get my PIP’...[in the meantime] they get into debt, which is they borrow money, they borrow money from friends. They use their credit cards, and it’s just stacking up a lot of grief. Yeah, I get quite angry at times over the system.” Adviser

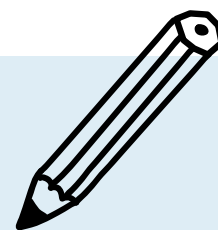
In the *Pathways to Work* Green Paper, the government set out plans to both improve the experience of accessing PIP and to better support disabled people into work. Its plans include scrapping the Work Capability Assessment in Universal Credit, instead using the PIP assessment to determine eligibility for any health-related additional financial support.¹⁵

This makes ensuring that the PIP assessment is robust and fair, crucial. But further, the government’s overarching aim for these ambitions—supporting people to work—is being hamstrung by a PIP assessment that worsens people’s health and that is entirely focused on claimants proving their incapacity.

Over the next year, the Timms Review will review the role, criteria, evidence and scope of the PIP assessment. We have welcomed the government’s commitment to co-producing the review with disabled people and organisations that represent them and Turn2us will be engaging in the process, taking our lead from disabled people and Disabled-Led Organisations. However, the PIP assessment is not an isolated process and whilst not technically part of the review, it must consider how the information on the application form is used in the assessment. There are valuable lessons to be learned from Social Security Scotland, where support is provided with form filling.¹⁶

Co-production partners in Scotland, who receive Adult Disability Payment (ADP) instead of PIP, have reported much more positive experiences of the system.

We recommend that the Timms Review considers:



- Learning from Social Security Scotland and exploring where PIP can replicate the Adult Disability Payment system, particularly around reducing the number of assessments and, where assessments are necessary, improving their quality.
- As a critical aspect of an effective assessment, how the PIP application can be made easier to complete.
- PIP assessors receiving training that gives them a strong understanding of the complex interactions between disability and ill-health. This would allow them to be less rigid in their conduct of the assessment and make more nuanced judgements about claimants rather than being prescriptive.

2. Building trust in the DWP:

A foundation for effective engagement

Stigma in the System found that most people approach the system with significant levels of shame and fear due to societal stigma and the reputation of the DWP. Further, many will have delayed claiming until reaching financial crisis. How people are treated in these moments has significant influence over claimants' finances, wellbeing and outlook, including their confidence to return to work.

Combative PIP assessments

Stigma in the System found that people accessing only health-related benefits were more likely to delay claiming, with a third (33%) waiting for more than a year after first experiencing a change in circumstance. This was often due to lack of awareness of eligibility, but a quarter of this group delayed because they were embarrassed about what people would think or because they didn't think of themselves as someone who would claim benefits. Claimants are likely to be attending an assessment at a point in their life that they feel the most vulnerable, either experiencing a major change to their health that has impacted their lives or having experienced some kind of trauma that has had a debilitating effect on their lives.

Rather than supportive environments, PIP assessments are consistently found to be harmful and frustrating experiences. The scoring required for PIP creates an unnecessarily adversarial environment, which pits claimants against the assessor, with both parties suspicious of the other and creating a lack of trust.

The fact that 67% of claims taken to tribunal (after initially being rejected) are overturned in favour of the claimant means disabled people have very little faith in the process. One woman avoided claiming PIP because she feared discussing her mental health difficulties with DWP staff, as this might lead them to question her suitability as a parent and potentially take her children away.

80%

of PIP claimants agreed with the statement "I often worry that my benefits could be taken away from me in future."

– YouGov Survey for *Stigma in the System* research



This is compounded by people's experiences of assessments where claimants said that assessors had misrepresented what had happened during the assessment process.

One woman was described by an assessor as "very mobile" as she walked quickly through the assessment room. In fact, the woman was feeling dizzy and wanted to get to her seat quickly. Another felt the whole process was hostile, and that the assessor had made up their mind before she arrived. We also found that 80% of current PIP claimants worried this critical support would be taken away from them in the future. And this fear exists for a reason. There are frequent cases of people having their support removed at reassessment, despite no change in their health.

Effectively assessing the support someone needs to navigate life with a disability, or health condition, depends on developing a thorough understanding of their unique circumstances, support networks, goals, and the barriers they face. This relies on open, honest conversations, potentially including coaching conversations to adapt to a new disability and explore what support might best help someone live the life they want to live. But right now, the lack of trust in assessors, combined with the process's lack of robustness and fairness, makes such trust impossible.

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'...they treat you as if you're guilty and you've got to prove yourself innocent. I know I was not guilty of anything, but that's the feeling that you get, isn't it? There's nothing wrong with you. You've got to prove that there is. Even if you've got your medical notes... And it is just that feeling, isn't it, that you've got to prove a lot of things that you've proved already... that's not really a very caring attitude.'

Co-production partner

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“... I expect to be judged by doctors. I expect to be judged by everyone. That's the norm. Sorry to get emotional but you suppress it because you can't think about it to get through your daily life, but it's grim, you know, it's changed my personality. It's just, I mean, obviously the illness changes you as well, but I just used to be really open and think the best of people and not be suspicious about their intentions, you know, and not feel like when I'm talking that you know that I'm saying something that could be used against me, you know, that's what it feels like. Yeah, you kind of have to guard yourself, which you didn't do before.”

Single non-working claimant

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Infantilising and demoralising Jobcentres

The Jobcentre Plus brand is a fixture of local high streets across Great Britain but, in evidence to a select committee inquiry, a minister referred to them as ‘the most unloved public space’.¹⁷ It has become synonymous with control and judgement. The current approach to employment support is punitive and fails to adequately support jobseekers – focused on enforcing compliance and arbitrary conditionality rather than providing personalised support. This has led to an ineffective service that reinforces stigma and cannot support the government’s ambition of getting more people into secure employment.

Over time, specialist support within the Jobcentre has been eroded. In the past, Jobcentres had specialist Disability Employment Advisors and other tailored roles but now most work coaches are generic.¹⁸ *Stigma in the System* found that, rather than supporting people to find work, work coaching contributed to a sense of proprietorship over how claimants spent their time, as a trade-off for receiving financial support.

Several claimants felt that the support they were given by work coaches was not aimed at helping them into work, but to ‘tick boxes’ in a system designed to

demonstrate conformance to proving that they are trying to find work. Claimants were asked to prove they were undertaking specific activities, regardless of whether it was productive or not, including undergoing unnecessary training or spending time applying for roles that do not align with their experience.

“I was undergoing some form of training, however much of that training wasn’t relevant... I think it was, you know, pointless, but they were sort of insisting upon it for quite a long time... if I didn’t engage, they were going to stop my benefits..., eventually they accepted that I wouldn’t be required to do it. But they did insist that I go along to the job centre every two weeks to sign on.”

Single non-working man

Claimants felt that they were being scrutinised, belittled and judged rather than supported. One single, working mother said the experience was ‘really quite derogatory, they try and teach you how to suck eggs’ and said it made her feel that she ‘wasn’t good enough for anything’. Two in five (42%) current claimants in the YouGov survey agreed with the statement ‘staff assessing my application lacked empathy for people in my situation.’



Case study: **Jo- from staff to claimant**

Jo spent years working in Jobcentres before illness meant she had to claim support herself. She says she’s seen “both sides of the desk.” As staff, rigid rules often left her powerless to help people; as a claimant, she experienced the same culture of mistrust: open-plan offices with desks too close to each other (with no privacy and overhearing private details about family breakdown/medication details) and staff reading from scripts instead of listening. “It strips away your dignity before you’ve even sat down.”

The actual Jobcentre environment also compounds feelings of inferiority. When developing our consultation response to the *Pathways to Work Green Paper*, our co-production partners referenced security guards at the door of Jobcentres, a lack of privacy, and screens between claimants and work coaches as factors that made the space feel punitive and controlling. One of our co-production partners told us that, when attending his local Jobcentre, four uniformed guards told him to bin a bottle of water “because it could be used as a weapon.” He said: “It felt like a double punishment. They wear you down, so you’ll give up.” The open plan office was also a barrier for some co-production partners who would have preferred to speak with their work coach privately about their health and did not want to be overheard.

The *Get Britain Working White Paper* acknowledges that there is stigma associated with the Jobcentre and that the current service is too focused on monitoring benefit compliance rather than providing customers with tailored employment and careers support.¹⁹ Government has said it wants to see work coaches spend more time delivering employment services instead of administering benefits, and that it intends to develop the work coach profession, focusing on professional coaching and helping individuals progress into meaningful work.²⁰

To help people return to employment after a setback, learn skills for a new career or progress in work, work coaches need to be boosting people’s confidence, self-esteem and hope for their future. This requires a skilful building of trust and effective coaching to uncover barriers to work and explore ambitions. The current Jobcentre operation, and work coach relationship, makes trust impossible and leaves people feeling hopeless and demoralised.

Case study: – from Stigma in the System



One single mother of a child aged 3, was already working part time and felt weekly or fortnightly Jobcentre appointments were a waste of her time. Despite informing the work coaches of her working days, appointments were made during her working hours.

“... When I went back in to work 7 hours a week, they then insisted on weekly Jobcentre appointments with the work coach. I think it started every week. Then it went to every two weeks, which I got quite irritable with.”

She also struggled to claim back the payments for childcare she was entitled to, as although she was working seven hours, she was only able to get the childcare needed by paying for 14 hours. The way she was treated left her feeling very negative towards the system; powerless and unsupported.

“... I don’t particularly trust any of it, and the sooner I’m out of the system, the better for me. As soon as I can go back to work full-time and not be dependent because I hate being dependent, upon the system. Because I do feel like your life is in somebody else’s hands and I know they can stop the money at any stage if they wanted to for no reason. So yeah, I just hate it.”



“

"I do feel like your life is in somebody else's hands and I know they can stop the money at any stage."

”

Trauma-informed approaches

In recent years, understanding of trauma has grown enormously. There is a greater awareness of its prevalence in society and deeper knowledge of its long-term effects on people. With this has come recognition of the role organisations and institutions often play in perpetuating trauma, inadvertently causing further harm to some of the most vulnerable people they work with.²¹ Through the National Trauma Transformation Programme, the Scottish Government is aiming to create a trauma-informed and responsive workforce and services that recognise where people are affected by trauma and respond in ways that prevent further harm.²²

Trauma and stigma are interlinked, with stigma amplifying the harm of trauma, sometimes leading people to adhere to negative stereotypes about themselves.²³ Claimants are generally engaging with the social security system after a major life change, such as relationship breakdown, job loss or a change in their health, increasing the likelihood that they will have experienced trauma. *Stigma in the System* details exactly how societal stigma around the social security system leads to internalised stigma and feelings of shame amongst most claimants.

The intersectionality of stigma and discrimination means that this will impact some claimants more than others. In 2023, research found that 71% of disabled people receiving benefits agreed that they had been made to feel guilty about doing so.²⁴ Furthermore, people in some minoritised communities face the ‘double stigma’ of difficulties in discussing money or mental health.²⁵

For the government to move away from a system that makes people sicker to one that supports people to recover, all frontline staff need to understand how their language and actions can either help overcome this internalised stigma or further reinforce it.

Trauma-informed principles should also apply to the physical Jobcentre environment. Private spaces, moving away from institutional aesthetics, natural light and comfortable furniture would create an environment that feels approachable. Attention to accessibility—including clear layouts, seating, and acoustics—would make the spaces more comfortable and easier to use. This can help shift the current punitive and controlling atmosphere into one based on trust and compassion.

Learning from Scotland, in 2024, the DWP embarked on a Trauma-Informed Approach Integration Programme, to implement trauma-informed training and approaches across all its services by 2030.²⁶



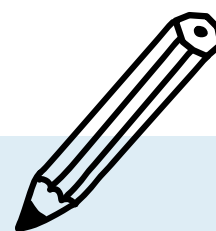
71%

of disabled people receiving benefits agreed that they had been made to feel guilty about doing so.

It is currently testing its approach through pilots and in innovation hubs across the country, including training for staff and changes to the Jobcentre environment. However, the government need to see this work as the critical foundation for its ambitions to improve employment support, PIP assessments and the effectiveness of the whole system.

An absolute priority within this must be the rollout of in-depth, comprehensive training for all work coaches and PIP assessors in trauma-informed conversations.

This should include training specifically on the stigma associated with the social security system. The training should ensure staff understand how their language and actions can either help overcome this internalised stigma or further reinforce it, leading to worsening mental health, reduced confidence and disempowerment.



We recommend that the DWP:

- Turbocharge its Trauma-informed Approach Integration Programme, including beginning the rollout of in-depth, comprehensive training for all work coaches and PIP assessors in trauma-informed conversations by the end of 2026.
- Reform Jobcentres and deliver wider employment support in welcoming, community-oriented spaces that prioritise personal support and build trust.

Trauma-informed approaches and better training will give PIP assessors and work coaches the skills to build the trust needed for effective engagement with claimants. However, for effective employment support, there remain two substantial barriers that need to be addressed.

1. Work coaches often face heavy workloads and lack sufficient time to engage meaningfully with claimants. This problem is compounded by their limited autonomy, which restricts their ability to build trust and respond to people's specific needs. The rest of this chapter addresses this.
2. The monitoring aspects of the role, such as enforcing the claimant commitment and applying sanctions, are not conducive to trust. Instead, they tend to create relationships based on control and fear rather than support and mutual respect. This is explored in our final chapter.

Giving work coaches the time to coach

Whilst *Stigma in the System* found that only 15% of claimants felt the support they had received from work coaches was useful, it found examples of where it had been highly effective. In these cases, work coaches had the time to listen and respond to individual circumstances and needs. Feeling heard made people feel validated, boosted confidence and ensured the time of both work coaches and claimants was used most efficiently. Similarly, we found experiences of work coaching during the Covid pandemic felt less pressured, less prescriptive and more supportive. The claimant requirements to find a job were lowered and work coaches had time to provide tailored support.

Generally, meetings with a work coach are either 10 or 20 minutes long and, in this time, work coaches have to recap the previous interview, discuss the jobseeker's progress and update several IT systems. The Work and Pension Select Committee's *Get Britain Working* report found that the 10 minutes that work coaches have with claimants is 'not nearly enough to address the needs of many claimants who are further from employment'.²⁷ The report goes on further, 'What time they do have is frequently poorly directed, with too little time spent building relationships and coaching people into work, and too much spent checking compliance with benefit conditions'.²⁸ Each person's aspirations, experiences and challenges are unique, and it takes time for a work coach to be able to understand these and offer genuinely useful support.

With the amount that work coaches must do in such a short time, mistakes occur. When claimants attended their work coach appointments, they reasonably expected the work coach to be able to rectify them, but this was not always the case. As well as worsening their financial situation, not correcting errors in a timely manner added to claimants feeling powerless and at fault. Such treatment discourages engagement from claimants and creates barriers to building a trusting relationship with the work coach.

The plans set out in the *Pathways to Work* Green Paper and the *Get Britain Working* White Paper acknowledge the critical role of work coaches and include commitments to provide support and skills tailored to individual needs, health requirements and local opportunities.²⁹ This includes making new health and skills support available to people in the Limited Capability for Work Related Activity (LCWRA) group.³⁰ However, over the last year, the DWP has had to reduce the level of support it offers to claimants due to a shortage of available work coaches at Jobcentres.³¹

A National Audit Office (NAO) report found that there is a shortage of work coaches whilst the number of UC claimants required to see a work coach has increased from 2.6 million in October 2023 to 3 million in October 2024.



In this time 2,100 fewer work coaches were employed than the DWP estimated it needed in the first six months of 2024-25 and 57% of Jobcentres reduced their support for claimants between September 2023 and November 2024 when work coach caseloads were too high.³² The DWP's plans to redeploy 1000 work coaches as part of its plan to provide new intensive employment support to around 65,000 sick and disabled people in 2025/26³³ is the right approach, but it doesn't address the shortage of work coaches.

The DWP's own modelling suggests that supporting someone with work-limiting health conditions or disabilities into full-time employment could lead to societal savings of £28,000 a year, including direct fiscal savings, tax revenue and wider economic impact.³⁴ The scale of this gain per individual moved into work, makes it hard to see how significantly increasing the number of work coaches can be anything other than a sound investment.

Case study Stigma in the System

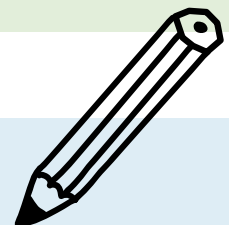


A mother had her Universal Credit cut off because the DWP claimed she missed an appointment that never existed.

"... I spoke to someone on the phone and they were quite rude. They were like 'well you should have gone, you should have kept up with everything and went to the meetings' and I said you can check my account. And then they did find out, luckily, that the person who closed our account, closed the wrong account."

Although her payments were reinstated, the lost money was never refunded, leaving her family in debt. However, when dealing with the staff at the DWP, the assumption was that the mistake was their fault.

We recommend that the DWP:



- Increase the duration of work coach appointments to allow for meaningful relationship building and to give work coaches the time to understand individual barriers to work and provide tailored support.

3. Building confidence:

Unlocking opportunities, creating possibilities

What is conditionality?

The UK social security system expects claimants to do everything that can reasonably be expected of them to find work or prepare for work in the future as a condition of receiving support. Over the last two decades conditionality has been extended to include lone parents and many disabled people.

Within Universal Credit (UC) there are six different conditionality groups with different levels of requirements for what individuals need to do as a condition of receiving their benefit. These relate to obligations to attend appointments, undertake work preparation activities, and search for and take up work.

In the current system, access to employment support is also linked with the specific group that someone is placed in.

Claimants commit to conditions around engaging in, looking for, and preparing for work. If they do not comply, financial penalties such as sanctions, where claimants' payments are stopped for a period until they reengage, are applied. In May 2025, 26.6% of UC claimants were in the conditionality regimes where sanctions can be applied, and 5.3% of these claimants were currently being sanctioned.³⁵

Stigma in the System found that strict and prescriptive conditionality reduced claimants' autonomy and motivation by mandating how they spent their time. They felt controlled and as if they had to demonstrate deservingness. The extensive requirements to demonstrate that specific or unproductive tasks had been completed fostered suspicion and diminished autonomy for many claimants.

Over the years, conditionality has become increasingly stringent, while the support provided to help claimants meet these requirements has become generic and counterproductive.³⁶

For example, a requirement that claimants complete a certain number of job applications each week. The vast majority of people want to work. For those who don't or can't, there are genuine barriers that need to be overcome such as lack of confidence or ill-health. An effective system needs to focus on removing these barriers and ensuring those who will never be able to work are properly supported. The system's core focus on checking that claimants are looking for work implies to claimants that they cannot be trusted and that the system thinks they need to be coerced into work.

Sanctions

Financial sanctions, imposed if claimants do not meet strict conditions, are both harmful and ineffective. They create distrust in the system, worsen physical and mental health and lead to financial hardship. Benefits already do not meet essential costs, and sanctions can be applied from any period between one month and three years. This can often tip people into unmanageable debt.

Officials and Ministers have said that DWP policy is for sanctions only to be used sparingly. However, the reality is that they are applied inconsistently and even when circumstances are beyond claimants' control. For example, one of our co-production partners was hospitalised and sanctioned, losing vital income during a period of ill health, for not attending an appointment despite trying to warn the Jobcentre they could not attend.

Whilst sanctions are not frequently used, claimants are clearly very cognisant of the risk. The focus on checking that claimants are meeting their claimant commitment, means the threat of financial sanctions hangs over every engagement, increasing fear of the DWP and reducing trust in work coaches. The fear and mistrust this creates reduced some claimants' willingness to engage with work. One claimant in *Stigma in the System* worried that if they were able to work a few hours, the Jobcentre would expect them to do more: *"they've misinterpreted things I've said in the past. I'd be terrified that they would think, well, she's well enough to consistently work a few hours a week, then why can't you do more"*.

Stigma in the System found that 55% of Universal Credit claimants said that claiming benefits worsened their health. The adversarial nature of the system was clear in the language used by interviewees.

They described themselves using words such as strong, "fighter" or having a strong "mindset" which allowed them to get through the emotional difficulties associated with applying for benefits. A qualitative study of Universal Credit claimants in North-East England supported this, finding that managing the Universal Credit claims process and the threat of sanctions exacerbated long-term health conditions.³⁷

The government has argued that without the threat of sanctions, actions that are intended to support people into work, such as work searches, would be voluntary.³⁸ However, there is evidence that they are harmful to the pay and progression of people who were sanctioned.³⁹ The DWP found in 2018 that asking claimants to see their work coach more often, or risk a sanction, did little to boost their earnings or in-work progression.⁴⁰ Sanctions also have a negative impact on earnings, and increase exits from benefits but not necessarily into a job.⁴¹

From fear and suspicion to confidence and hope

The *Get Britain Working* White Paper and *Pathways to Work* Green Paper recognise that there is currently too much focus on checking claimant's compliance rather than genuine employment support. The papers acknowledge the ineffectiveness of prescriptive requirements, particularly for those with ill health or disability. However, employment support for people currently in the 'Limited Capability for Work Related Activity', will be accompanied by conditionality.⁴² The government is at risk of failing to learn from the mistakes of the last 15 years by relying on infantilising and prescriptive conditionality. Instead, focusing on voluntary engagement by promoting genuinely useful employment support and rebuilding trust with claimants, will nurture claimant confidence ambitions and hope for the future.

There of course must be a mechanism of accountability for those who consistently fail to engage.

However, there is no need for this to be a threat hanging over every conversation with a work coach. When exploring conditionality with DWP staff, there was agreement that inconsistent approaches are being used by work coaches across the country, sometimes reflecting different Jobcentre cultures. Whilst a localised approach to employment support is necessary to ensure advice and training reflect local labour markets, the DWP need to ensure there is shared understanding about the damage sanctions have on people's faith in the system, including driving disengagement and reducing trust.

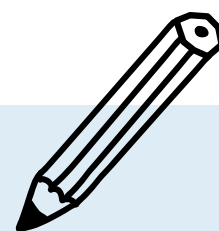
We support the New Economic Foundation's (NEF) proposal for engagement for the first three months of a new claim to be voluntary, and for sanctions to be considered as an absolute last resort.⁴³ Conditionality should be a 'backstop' in the system rather than a default and the focus must move from getting people into any job into the right role for their ambition, skillset and health needs. With good training and more time, work coaches should be able to more effectively apply discretion to conditionality, and the government must remove mandatory conditionality for those furthest away from the labour market.

Voluntary engagement does not mean leaving people to their own devices, but the system adapting to what claimants really need. Using the proposed support conversations detailed in the *Pathways to Work* Green Paper, work coaches would focus on working with people to initially understand their skills and experiences and together set out a plan. This creates space for claimants to build trust with their work coach, as well as explore ambitions, barriers and training needs. It sets the tone of engagement as genuine support and nurturing ambition rather than suspicion and contempt.

As NEF propose, if there were no engagement after 3-months, work coaches should seek to understand the claimants' challenges and then set out some more detailed expectations. However, those with health conditions, caring responsibilities and disabilities should be exempt from this.⁴⁴ Critically, this approach would make employment support less risky and daunting for those with additional barriers, as well as building trust, increasing engagement and reducing the stigma associated with engaging with work coaches.

We recommend that the DWP:

- Adopt the New Economic Foundation's proposal to promote voluntary engagement for the first three months of a new claim, with the focus on building relationships and co-producing a plan. After that initial period, if there is no evidence of activity or progress, a review should take place to explore barriers and decide if more prescriptive conditionality is required. If these requirements are still not met, a warning and a final review should take place before financial sanctions are imposed.





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Using the proposed support conversations detailed in the *Pathways to Work Green Paper*, work coaches would focus on working with people to initially understand their skills and experiences and together set out a plan.

”

Conclusion

This research has shown that stigma within the social security system fuels mistrust among claimants. This mistrust not only harms individuals' well-being but also hinders the effectiveness of support provided. Individuals seeking support often fear judgement, shame, or discrimination, which in turn creates scepticism about whether the system genuinely supports their needs or is intent on scrutinising or penalising them. Claimants believe that their disclosures will be misunderstood or unfairly judged, causing them to doubt the fairness and impartiality of assessments and decision-makers. Past negative experiences make individuals wary of engaging fully with the system and the perceived adversarial nature of the system makes claimants feel as if the system is trying to catch them out.

To some extent government has recognised this by putting forward its intentions for creating personalised services, but it must go further recognising that the system is interconnected and interlinked, and that reforms cannot happen in isolation. This means recognising the challenges and vulnerabilities people face, creating spaces that feel welcoming and truly supportive, and removing punitive elements from the system.

Further, cuts to an already inadequate system, or combining increased employment support with prescriptive conditionality, risks ignoring the lessons of the last 15 years. In contrast, by investing in frontline staff, Jobcentres and assessments, the system can be transformed into one that supports and enables people to get on with their lives. This will mean the system is able to both properly protect those who are unable to work and ensure those who can work are more quickly supported into work that meets individual's goals and ambitions.



Combined with government's plans to reduce NHS waiting lists, improve mental health provision and ensure employers provide better support for people to stay in work, this will reduce the support needed from our social security system.

This won't happen overnight. Changing the culture of Jobcentres and rebuilding trust with claimants will take some time. However, the potential savings are vast, supporting someone into work lead to societal savings of £28,000 a year, making it easy to see how an effective work coach can pay for themselves.⁴⁵

Meaningful change must also involve those with lived experience of the system. Their insights should go beyond consultation, and they must be fully involved in designing and testing policies so that they genuinely meet people's needs. The Timms Review is a positive signal from government towards this approach, and we are excited to be working with them on this review.

Changing our social security system also relies on changing the language and narrative we use to describe it. Almost all of us will need the system at some point in our lives, and our research found that 71% of the public agree that no one should feel ashamed for accessing the support they need. Yet 68% of claimants do.

These harmful misconceptions and stigma, created by lazy and incorrect narratives, drive shame and distrust in the DWP. We urge parliamentarians to use our '[Supporting better conversations about social security | Turn2us](#)' guides to ensure the language they choose helps to build understanding about the role of our social security system and avoids fuelling harmful misconceptions and stigma.

The social security system is an essential public service designed to support individuals and families through life's unpredictable challenges, whether that be losing a job, managing a disability, or facing sudden financial hardship. Only through genuine, sustained commitment to addressing stigma and rebuilding trust can we ensure that it fulfils its fundamental promise to provide us all with security and dignity.



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We urge parliamentarians to use our 'Talking About Social Security' guides to ensure the language they choose helps to build understanding about the role of our social security system and avoids fuelling harmful misconceptions and stigma.

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From stigma to support

Rebuilding trust in our social security system

Author: Meagan Levin, Policy & Public Affairs Manager, Turn2us
This report was published by Turn2us in October 2025.



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