

Work coach shortage leads DWP to reduce support for Universal Credit claimants

4 months ago



The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) has reduced the level of support it offers to Universal Credit (UC) claimants due to a shortage of available work coaches at jobcentres, amid government plans to get more people into work and progressing in their careers, according to a new National Audit Office (NAO) report.

DWP relies on its network of 646 jobcentres across Great Britain to help people move into work and to support those already in work to progress. In November 2024, the government set out its plans for reforming employment support, including the role of jobcentres.

DWP tailors jobcentre support for UC claimants based on their earnings and personal circumstances. The number of claimants in categories where DWP could require them to receive support from a work coach – which includes the ‘Intensive Work Search’ category for those with the lowest earnings – grew from 2.6 million in October 2023 to 3 million in October 2024. DWP has increased the number of Intensive Work Search claimants by raising the earnings threshold.

Work coaches play a critical role working directly with claimants to identify their needs and provide support. But partly due to funding constraints, DWP has not had enough work coaches to meet the expected demand for jobcentre support, with shortfalls in five of its seven regions in 2023-24. DWP has also faced challenges in recruiting and retaining work coaches.

To help manage the shortfall, DWP has prioritised supporting claimants in the Intensive Work Search category and postponed plans to require ‘Light Touch’ claimants to meet regularly with a work coach. This resulted in DWP needing an estimated 900 fewer work coaches in 2024-25 than it otherwise would have

done.

DWP has also set out measures that jobcentres can implement if work coaches' caseloads are too high. From September 2023 to November 2024, 57% of jobcentres used these flexibilities to reduce the support they provide for claimants.

The proportion of Intensive Work Search claimants who move into work each month has declined in the past two years to below pre-pandemic levels.

There is also substantial variation in performance across DWP's seven jobcentre regions and 37 districts. At district level, from December 2023 to November 2024, Birmingham and Solihull had the lowest average monthly into-work rate (5.5%) and Northern Scotland had the highest (10.8%).

In November 2024, the government published a white paper that set out its plans for reforming employment support. The plans include creating a jobs and careers service, bringing together jobcentres with the National Careers Service in England.

The NAO recommends that DWP assesses the impact of the shortfall in work coaches on jobcentres' ability to provide people with the intended level of support, and uses the findings to inform the design of its future operating model for employment support.

DWP should also set out the information it will use to monitor jobcentres' performance so that it can identify and share good practice from those that are doing well, as well as improve how it measures and reports outcomes, with metrics covering factors such as the sustainability and quality of employment.

Gareth Davies, head of the NAO, said: "Helping people move into and progress in work is crucial to boosting productivity and reducing economic inactivity.

"As it takes forward the government's plans for reforming employment support, DWP should pay close attention to how it can make best use of its work coaches and ensure that people get the support they need.

"Given the key role jobcentres will play in supporting the government's ambition to increase the employment rate, DWP should also be transparent about how effective they are and evaluate the impact of its changes on the system of employment support."