



## OLDHAM COUNCIL

Louise Doyle, District Manager  
&  
Victoria Wheelwright, Employer and  
Partnership Manager  
Oldham District Job Centre Plus  
Tweedale House  
75 Union Street  
Oldham  
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Dear Ms Doyle and Ms Wheelwright,

### **Re. Benefit Sanctions**

I am writing to you as Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on Oldham Council in connection with the application of sanctions in Oldham. You are doubtless aware of the many concerns raised by local politicians and local agencies about this issue.

I have also written recently to the Secretary of State on this matter and previously in response to the consultation about the Oakley Review.

I understand that you have developed a pilot training programme approved by the Department of Work and Pensions for roll-out to community based advisors in Oldham; and that this training will better equip these advisors to support jobseekers so that they are able to meet conditionality and avoid sanctions?

### **Councillor Howard Sykes MBE**

Leader of the Opposition, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group Oldham Council, Member for Shaw Ward, Member for South Ward Shaw & Crompton Parish Council.

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#### **Please address all correspondence to:**

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I commend you for this initiative and I would be keen to support it. I would therefore, be grateful if you could advise me what you might require from Oldham Council, as a key partner of Job Centre Plus, to help the roll-out of this much-needed programme as soon as possible so that I might help facilitate this?

In addition, I would like to please pose 13 questions to you (some of which could form the basis of a local code of bespoke practice, and perhaps in due course be adopted as policy nationally) in relation to the local administration of sanctions:

1. What written information does JCP currently give claimants about conditionality and sanctions? Is anything different made available to ESA claimants/
2. What job-seeking actions are typically expected each week of a jobseeker as part of the Claimant Commitment? And how much time each week is the jobseeker expected to actively seek work?
3. What evidence does a jobseeker have to provide JCP to prove that they are actively seeking work?
4. There is a great deal of confusion amongst jobseekers about volunteering. Please can you clarify how much time can be spent each week volunteering and how much notice a jobseeker is allowed to provide the organisation with whom s/he is volunteering, before being required to give up the placement and take up paid employment?
5. Following the Oakley Review is JCP producing something new nationally and / or locally for claimants?
6. Are you looking to reintroduce group information sessions at which conditionality, and the requirements to meet it, can clearly be spelt out to claimants?
7. Do Job Centre Advisors and Coaches routinely speak with claimants face-to-face or over the telephone before a 'making a doubt' referral is made?
8. Are vulnerable claimants always invited to bring someone with them to interviews?
9. Are claimants told of the importance of providing 'good reason' and urged to do this prior to referral?
10. Is it custom and practice to issue claimants with a verbal warning for an initial transgression (a so-called 'yellow card') prior to referral at second infringement?
11. Is there any extra latitude given to claimants whose first language is not English or where such claimants have vulnerability or special needs (maybe an extra verbal warning)?

12. If a sanction is applied, is there any further attempt at verbal contact by the advisor / coach with the claimant; to confirm that they have received the letter telling them of the sanction, to answer any questions they may have and to inform them about applying for a Hardship Payment or to appeal?
13. Lastly are claimants informed that local agencies, such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau or the Council's Welfare Rights Service, can support them and are contact details supplied?

I very much look forward to your reply, to working with you collaboratively, on the training roll-out and to create a bespoke model of local application in Oldham.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Howard Sykes". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

Howard Sykes