

Putting “good work” at the centre of employment policy

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Introduction

The Department for Work and Pensions’ *Get Britain Working White Paper* marks an important shift in focus for UK employment policy, from helping people into *any job* to supporting them into *good jobs*, alongside increasing engagement with employers. This is a welcome and necessary development: good jobs are essential for individual wellbeing, business productivity, and a resilient economy. If the Department’s ambitions are to be realised, it is important that this translates into clear changes in policies, practices and how success is measured.

This policy briefing sets out a blueprint for operationalising “good work” across policy and practice, identifying how the DWP can engage with Universal Credit claimants and employers to promote quality employment and positive progression activity.

About the author

This policy briefing was developed by Dr Katy Jones, during a short-term policy secondment undertaken as part of Manchester Metropolitan University’s Chancellor’s Fellowship, supported by the University’s think tank, MetroPolis. Katy is a Reader (Associate Professor) in Employment and Head of Manchester Met’s Decent Work and Productivity Research Centre. She is a leading researcher in an ongoing programme of research on UK Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP), including the ESRC-funded *Universal Credit and Employers* project: this project made wide-ranging recommendations including a move away from the “any jobs” approach to ALMP, and a need for the DWP to become a more active stakeholder in the good work agenda. Further related research is being supported by the Nuffield Foundation through the *Universal Credit, Good Work and Progression* project. Based primarily in the in-work progression policy team, the Fellowship has provided a valuable opportunity to be embedded in the DWP at a time of significant employment service reform, liaising with multiple teams across policy and operations and exploring internal evidence.

Disclaimer: This is a discussion paper, which represents the views of the author. It does not reflect the position of the DWP.

The Case for “Good Jobs” Over “Any Jobs”

The scale and significance of the shift from an “any jobs” to a “good jobs” approach should not be underestimated. The UK has long been internationally recognised for its “Work First” approach to active labour market policy, which prioritises rapid job entry for unemployed claimants. This model has focused on moving jobseekers into work as quickly as possible, often without regard for job quality.

In recent years, under successive Conservative governments, the “any jobs” approach has been extended to people in work. As the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) brought together out-of-work and in-work benefits into a single system, this has enabled the UK to extend behavioural requirements and employment support, traditionally applied to unemployed claimants, to low-paid workers. Under this system, Universal Credit claimants are not only expected to take any job quickly, but once in work, some must continue to engage with employment services to demonstrate ongoing efforts to increase their income.

Initial trials of in-work conditionality (IWC) produced mixed results. The DWP-commissioned McGregor-Smith In-Work Progression Commission recommended a more supportive, incentive-led approach aligned with wider policy areas such as skills, childcare, and transport. Although voluntary support models were tested, recent policy shifts under the Conservative government accelerated the introduction of mandatory requirements. Currently, claimants earning below a set threshold (the Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET) equivalent to 18 hours at the minimum wage) must demonstrate efforts to increase hours, progress in their role, or seek additional or alternative work. Requirements and eligibility for support are determined through “intensive” or “light touch” conditionality regimes depending on earnings. In practice, this has amounted to a “Work First, Work More” approach (Jones, 2022), with the overriding emphasis continuing to be placed on the individual’s responsibility to increase the quantity of work (i.e. hours of work) over employer-side changes or broader definitions of good work.

The (2024-present) Labour Government has stated a “revised focus on supporting progression and good work”, with an emphasis on aligning employment support with skills and careers advice. Recent changes include increasing the length while reducing the frequency of in-work interventions for working Universal Credit claimants who fall under the intensive work search regime (8 weekly compared to fortnightly), with an aim to enable Work Coaches to have more tailored conversations to plan and support progression towards better quality employment.

Why This Shift Matters

Replacing the “any jobs” model with a focus on “good jobs” is bold – and essential. Prioritising job entry alone can lead to poor long-term outcomes for individuals, businesses, and the wider economy. Evidence from both the UK and international contexts highlights the limitations of the “any jobs” approach:

- **Short-term gains, long-term costs:** While sanctions-based conditionality may drive short-term employment gains, it is associated with lower long-term earnings and higher rates of return to unemployment or inactivity (National Audit Office, 2016).
- **Risk of involuntary underemployment:** International evidence shows that coercive active labour market policies – such as pressure to accept work under threat of sanctions – are linked to increased involuntary part-time work and unstable employment patterns (Haapanala, 2022).
- **Pressure into poor-quality work:** Extensive qualitative research shows that strict requirements to take any job often push people into insecure, low-paid roles with little opportunity for progression – roles that are frequently unsustainable (Briken & Taylor, 2018; Jones et al., 2024).
- **Traps people in low-quality work:** Poor-quality jobs are rarely stepping stones. Those working in low paid, insecure tend to get trapped in them rather than moving into secure, better-paid work (Whittaker & Hurrell, 2013; Navani & Florisson, 2024). A DWP-commissioned review (McGregor Smith/DWP, 2018) has also highlighted the challenges of progression in low-paid sectors. Research with employers similarly shows that progression demands placed on individuals often conflict with employer practices, particularly in flexible service sectors (Jones & Carson, 2023, 2024).
- **Persistent employment gaps:** Despite years of activation-focused policies, many groups, including disabled people, lone parents and carers (predominantly women), remain excluded from the labour market or find themselves in jobs which do not match their skills and experience. In addition to discriminatory attitudes, the lack of quality job opportunities with flexible working options or required workplace adjustments remains a key barrier (e.g. King’s College London and Working Families, 2021).

Defining Good Jobs in Policy and Practice

Although the *Get Britain Working* (GBW) White Paper places strong emphasis on “good jobs,” the term itself remains loosely defined. Given the significant shifts required to realise the Department’s new ambitions, both in policy and practice, a shared understanding and clearly agreed framework is essential. This will be critical to enabling Jobcentres (and the new Jobs and Careers Service), employers, Mayoral Strategic Authorities/local authorities, commissioned employment services and other

stakeholders to deliver on the government’s commitment to “help more people to get good jobs.”

A clear definition is also vital for aligning cross-cutting government agendas – i.e. *Get Britain Working* and *Make Work Pay* – and for shaping meaningful employer engagement, particularly where changes on the demand side (i.e. the nature and quality of work) are key to achieving the Department’s objectives.

What Do We Mean by “Good Work”?

The concept of “good work” overlaps with a range of related terms, such as *decent work*, *fair work*, and *meaningful work*, used across policy, academic, and international contexts. To support greater clarity and consistency, this policy briefing proposes the adoption of the **CIPD’s definition of good work** as a guiding framework. According to the CIPD, good work:

1. Is fairly rewarded
2. Provides the means to make a secure living
3. Offers opportunities to develop skills and build a career, and delivers a sense of fulfilment
4. Takes place in a supportive environment with constructive workplace relationships
5. Supports a healthy work-life balance
6. Promotes physical and mental wellbeing
7. Gives workers voice and choice to shape their working lives
8. Is accessible to all.

Why This Framework?

Adopting the CIPD’s definition offers several advantages for DWP policy and service development. It is:

- ✓ **Evidence-based:** Grounded in research
- ✓ **Clear and accessible:** Easily understood by a broad range of stakeholders
- ✓ **Aligned with key DWP objectives:** especially those centred on supporting work entry and progression, reducing benefit expenditure and tackling labour market exclusion (including economic inactivity)
- ✓ **Comprehensive yet flexible:** Acknowledges both subjective and objective dimensions of good work, and the multiple factors that influence job quality
- ✓ **Aligned with existing initiatives:** Closely reflects other widely used definitions, including various place-based employment charters and frameworks (see below)
- ✓ **Strategically valuable:** As the professional body for HR and people development, the CIPD represents an important stakeholder. Strengthening partnerships with the CIPD, grounded in a shared vision, could significantly enhance employer engagement efforts across sectors.

Recognising Tensions Between Policy and Practice

Shifting DWP policy and practice from an “any job” approach to one focused on “good jobs” demands a significant cultural transformation. As a large and complex organisation, the DWP must align both policy and operational teams to deliver on the good work agenda. Beyond adopting a clear definition of “good jobs,” it is essential to acknowledge and manage several inherent tensions if this agenda is to be effectively implemented.

Balancing Support for Entry-Level Roles with Promoting Quality Employment

There is a critical need to balance support for entry-level positions in high-employment sectors with efforts to connect claimants to higher-skilled, better-paid, and future-facing opportunities in priority growth sectors. A focus on entry level roles does not adequately reflect the diversity of experience and qualification of the DWP’s customer base. However, promoting “good jobs” also does not mean disengagement from high-employment sectors or a dismissal of the value of entry-level work:

- **All sectors have potential for improvement.** While sectors such as hospitality, retail, and social care are often associated with low pay and insecure work, they remain essential to the UK’s economic and social prosperity and offer significant potential for job quality enhancement.
- **Entry-level roles can be good jobs.** For individuals lacking the skills or experience for higher-paying roles, entry-level positions can offer valuable experience, provided they act as genuine stepping stones to better-quality employment.

Deepening Employer Engagement While Challenging Poor Practice

Stronger employer engagement is essential, especially given that only one in six employers currently engage with Jobcentre Plus. However, public employment services – both nationally and locally – must also be equipped and empowered to have robust, constructive conversations with employers about job quality, progression opportunities, and working conditions.

This creates a tension: a customer service model centred on employer satisfaction, particularly when delivered through account management, may limit the ability to challenge poor practice. Balancing responsiveness to employer needs with advocacy for job quality is vital.

Working Within a Predominantly Supply-Side Framework

The DWP does not control all the levers required to guarantee good work. Aspects such as effective management, inclusive workplace cultures, and positive employee-employer relations typically fall outside its direct influence. However, many of the core components of “good work” fall within – or adjacent to – DWP’s operational remit. For example, the Department is – to some degree – already advancing this agenda through targeted support for

groups at risk of labour market exclusion, and by tackling barriers to fair and equitable employment outcomes.

The DWP has an important **enabling and convening role**: connecting individuals to quality job opportunities, embedding job quality into employer relationships, and helping to shape a joined-up policy environment that recognises and rewards good work.

Place-Based Variations in Measuring Good Work

Across the UK, definitions of “good work” vary by place, for example, Greater Manchester’s Good Employment Charter, the Scottish Government’s Fair Work policy, and Northern Ireland’s adoption of the Carnegie Framework. These differences reflect local priorities and contexts, but the core principles are similar. A broad national definition, like the CIPD’s, can provide a consistent reference point while still allowing local networks to adopt their own standards. This helps align national and local efforts in principle, even if the details differ.

Operationalising “Good Work”: policy and practice recommendations

Delivering “good work” requires more than aspiration – it demands deliberate policy alignment, practical tools for frontline delivery, and a culture of shared accountability. By embedding these principles into partnerships, campaigns, and service design, public employment services can play a pivotal role in driving improvements in job quality and progression for all.

This section outlines practical opportunities for embedding the principles of “good work” across the DWP policy and operations, with an emphasis on national partnerships, campaigning, local delivery, and social dialogue (i.e. involving employers and other social partners in policy making). While the focus here is on DWP-delivered policy and services, these recommendations are also relevant to Mayoral Strategic Authorities/Local Authorities and the wider employment support sector.

1. National Partnerships and Account Management

Expand employer engagement beyond customer service models

Public employment services should adopt an engagement framework that is explicitly structured around the good work principles that are central to DWP objectives (e.g. fair pay, progression, security). The Department should explore scope for more in-depth employer engagement focused on improving working practices (see case study examples below). Providing a forum for business-to-business engagement (rather than single account management approaches) could help to build a community and spread best practice amongst the DWP’s key employer partners.

Expand employer engagement beyond high employment, entry-level roles, especially where it supports businesses directly to fill entry level roles, the Department should focus more efforts on engaging with employers with clear and demonstrable progression pathways. Targeting key growth sectors with higher paid roles and opportunities progression is also critical. Working with priority sectors, the Department should develop and promote exemplars of good practice and build on successful ‘Career pathways’ models combining industry training with placement support (e.g. Work Advance in the United States – see Wilson and Mason, 2024 for an overview).

Clearly communicate policy objectives/changes to employers. It is important that there is clarity for employers on both opportunities and asks – beyond immediate job entry. There are a range of ways employers could support Jobcentre (and the new JCS) efforts to support people to move into and progress in work – but these aren’t always clear to employers (especially those who do not already have a relationship with DWP).

Work with employers to identify and overcome tensions that may arise i.e. where employer practices may conflict with DWP policy (e.g. monthly payment cycles for UC claimants vs 4-weekly payment cycles; expectations to seek work opportunities with another employer vs the use of restrictive covenants in employment contracts; a lack of good quality roles with progression opportunities for part-time staff).

2. Campaigns and Employer Covenants

Elevate the narrative around “Good Work”

Build on existing models like Disability Confident and local initiatives (e.g. Greater Manchester’s Good Employment Week) to promote a national conversation about what “good work” means in practice. Ensure that the varied Covenants and accreditation schemes promoted by the Department which focus on specific groups (e.g. Homelessness Alliance, Care Leavers Covenant, Disability Confident) are all underpinned by shared “good work” principles.

Strengthen accountability in employer campaigns

Enhance the credibility and impact of employer initiatives by aligning with frameworks like the Disability Employment Charter, ensuring that signatories demonstrate measurable commitment to inclusion and fair employment.

3. Local Delivery and Coaching Support

Enable jobseekers to focus on the quality rather than quantity of job applications and place more emphasis on supporting them into roles and sectors which match their capabilities and experience. Place a greater emphasis on progression and longer-term career development from the outset, by supporting people into higher paying sectors or organisations where progression from entry level positions is more common.

Increase the focus on the quality of roles and placements offered as part of job creation programmes (e.g. the new Youth Guarantee), including greater oversight and encouragement of employers to go beyond minimum programme requirements (e.g. by paying a Real Living Wage).

Foster local good work networks: Encourage Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and local partnerships to engage in and/or create peer networks that share and promote good practice, organised around core dimensions of good work (e.g. flexibility, secure work, wellbeing, fair pay). Use these networks as a vehicle for promoting the concepts and benefits of good work and progression. Facilitating business-to-business engagement should be a core component, alongside connecting employers to wider business support services.

Support and empower frontline staff: Embed “good work” principles into Coaching Academy training modules. Ensure staff are equipped with key resources (e.g. ACAS guidance) to support informed and empowering claimant conversations and wider support. This should include more support on how to help in-work claimants progress (e.g. help to identify skills training and careers support opportunities appropriate to claimants’ wider circumstances).

Enhance job listings and guidance: Ensure jobseekers have clear and up-to-date information from employers about progression opportunities when considering vacancy listings. Develop clearer job opportunity listings (e.g. via Managing Jobs and Opportunities, MJO) that specify pay, flexibility, progression, and job security, supporting better claimant choices and generating useful labour market insights (see below).

Promote employment rights awareness: Ensure claimants are informed of their employment rights (especially recent changes under the Employment Bill) and signpost to trusted sources of advice and training (e.g. ACAS, TUC, Citizens Advice).

4. UC policy, data and evaluation levers

Align success measures with Good Work indicators and balance short-term benefits with longer term outcomes.

There is a need to develop metrics that support the Department’s understanding of “good work” outcomes, and the impact of policy on these. Short-term benefits to annually managed expenditure (AME) which result from an emphasis on entry into any job, and increasing hours, should be balanced with reductions in longer-term fiscal expenditure associated with sustained progression, better health and well-being outcomes and productivity gains. An evaluation strategy is required to evidence the gains associated with a longer-term approach.

Build intelligence through existing infrastructure e.g. explore how Managing Jobs and Opportunities (MJO) and Real-Time Information (RTI) data can be used to measure and monitor job quality more effectively. As noted above, entry level jobs can provide important opportunities for those who lack the skills and experience required to access

higher paid roles, however the proportion of these roles supported by DWP activities, and the extent to which they do translate into good progression outcomes, should be closely monitored. Data can be used to identify and prompt troubleshooting with employers and other key stakeholders: e.g. if all part-time roles are restricted to minimum wage/entry level then this intelligence could be used to initiate conversations with employers, both locally and nationally, about the importance of offering higher-quality roles to individuals unable to work full time.

5. Policy Development and Social Dialogue

Adopt “Good Work” as a unifying policy principle

Be an active stakeholder in the good work agenda, by working with employers and other partners locally and nationally to encourage better quality employment practices. Position “good work” as a shared goal around which government, employers, and stakeholders can collaborate, embedding it as a core element of progression strategies and partnership development.

Leverage employer expertise in policymaking

Actively involve employers and other social partners in co-designing employment policies and services, ensuring they reflect real workplace challenges and opportunities. Identify more innovative policy solutions by asking employers directly about what they want and need to support access to (and progression in) good work. This requires formal mechanisms at each stage of the policymaking process, rather than ad hoc consultation after policies and programmes have already been developed.

Case studies

Practical examples of how employment support providers can more proactively promote job quality through their engagement with jobseekers and employers. These are largely drawn from a recent special edition of the Institute of Employability Professionals’ (IEP) Journal – Edition 10: ‘Supporting people into good jobs, not just any jobs’.

Example 1: Greater Manchester’s Good Employment Charter has built a strong community of employers committed to good employment – in addition to recognising good employers in Greater Manchester through membership of the charter, it also facilitates a community of business-to-business best practice sharing through a lively programme of events and workshops, including an annual “good employment week”. It has also worked with local education providers to provide guidance to employability/careers professionals and students to increase their awareness of what good employment looks like.

Example 2: The Employer Innovation Lab, Social Ventures Australia. A 12-month programme which takes employers through a process of designing, implementing and assessing a small practice change pilot within their organisation. Each Lab kicks off with a two-day workshop structured to allow employers to identify changes in their practices that might provide better quality jobs for less privileged young people, and to design a project to trial these changes in practice.

Example 3: Change Agent programme, by the ReAct Partnership and Timewise: a programme designed to support employment support providers’ expertise in promoting ‘fair flexible work from day one of employment’ to the employers they work with. The programme consisted of workshops, coaching sessions and masterclasses to build understanding of the levers to engage employers in conversations about flexible working when talking to them about vacancies and recruitment, as well as developing expertise in flexible hiring among provider staff so they could support employers with job redesign, unlocking more job vacancies to flexible work from day one.

Example 4: Tourism and Hospitality toolkit developed by the University of Strathclyde’s Fraser of Allander Institute and The Poverty Alliance. The toolkit provides support to the tourism and hospitality sector on key areas such as training and development, recruitment and retention, and fair work. It also provides support to employees through information on their rights at work, education and training, and more links to support when working in hospitality.

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