

# Deal or no deal

Radical government welfare proposals could compel claimants with heroin or crack problems to engage with treatment services or lose benefits. **Marcus Roberts** provides the lowdown on Labour's tough-talking tactics

Under new plans to shake up the welfare system, set out in the Green Paper *No-one written off*, welfare claimants will be required to tell Jobcentres if they are using heroin or crack - and pay benefits back if it is later found that they failed to declare a drug problem.

Jobcentres could also be told if people test positive for heroin or crack at the police station following arrest or are placed on a Drug Rehabilitation Requirement (DRR) by the courts. There are also plans to allow prisons to share information about newly released prisoners with Jobcentres. In addition, long-term claimants could be required to work full-time on community service projects in return for benefits.

Within the drug sector there will be concerns about the ethics and efficacy of these proposals. In particular, there would appear to be a wide range of ethical, legal, practical and human rights issues around the plans to require claimants to declare (illegal) drug use, allow information sharing with the criminal justice system and compel those who do declare a drug problem to undertake treatment.

Drug users claiming incapacity benefits have long been a preoccupation for the press. In April a *Daily Express* headline declared its 'Outrage at £8.5m a week for jobless junkies and winos', quoting a backbench Conservative MP: "Taxpayers will be outraged that so much of their money is going to junkies and winos who will use the money simply to feed their disgusting habits. Nobody forced them to get hooked on drink or drugs. It's their responsibility to get cleaned up and off benefits."

More sober analysis suggests a significant number of welfare claimants are indeed problem drug

users. And the number of people on Incapacity Benefit whose diagnosis included a reference to drugs had more than doubled in the ten years from 1997 to 2007, from 21,900 to 49,890. But, to put this in perspective, this still represents only 1.89 per cent of the total Incapacity Benefit caseload.

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Launching the Green Paper, James Purnell, Secretary of State at the Department of Work and Pensions, explained the proposals are based on a 'simple deal': 'more support in return for greater responsibility'. The minister spelt out his meaning in an article for the *Daily Mail*, in which he insisted that there is 'nothing left wing about sentencing people to a life on benefits or expecting everyone else to pick up the bill for people who simply don't want to work'. In a Foreword to the Green Paper, Prime Minister Gordon Brown threw his weight behind these sentiments, saying that the rights of welfare recipients would be 'met with tough responsibilities that respect taxpayers as well as those claiming benefits', and adding that this 'means treatment for drug misusers coupled with clear consequences for those who fail to take it up'.

This is the latest instalment of a major shake up of Britain's benefit system. A little over a year ago, in May 2007, the last Welfare Reform Act received Royal Assent. With around 2.7 million people claiming Incapacity Benefit, this Act set out to deliver on government promises to tackle what the tabloid press was dubbing 'sick note UK'. The aspiration was to reduce the number of people on incapacity benefits by 1 million within a decade.

Reaction to the Green Paper has been mixed. One Labour MP branded the proposals 'a disgrace', while the Conservatives, who have similar proposals, welcomed them. Tory leader David Cameron has promised the government that his party will help ease the passage of this legislation through parliament.

Yet there is little evidence to show that sanctions will be effective in increasing the number of problem drug users who actually get into jobs. A survey of employers conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in 2005 found that 60 per cent disregarded applications from people with drug or alcohol problems, a criminal record or a history of mental health problems. More than half said that nothing would ever persuade them to recruit from these 'core jobless' groups.

The current tone and trajectory of the welfare debate is hardly conducive to a shift in these kind of attitudes. At the least, the government will need to deliver on its side of the 'simple deal' by reducing the formidable barriers that prevent problem drug users accessing education, training, work and other meaningful activity.

■ **Marcus Roberts** is Director of Policy at DrugScope

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