

## **Therapists Against the Work Cure**

Statement from *Partners for Counselling & Psychotherapy (PCP)*

13<sup>th</sup> October 2022

On Monday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2022, World Mental Health Day, the Government announced £122 million of funding for mental health. But the bitter reality is that this money is not being spent on in-patient beds, community mental health initiatives or trained counsellors and psychotherapists for public mental health services. Instead the Government is using this money to recruit and train 700 'employment advisers' to work alongside therapists in the NHS's flagship Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme. This will help drive the highly contested policy of 'welfare conditionality' that threatens benefits claimants with sanctions if they don't conform to certain patterns of behaviour, a policy which targets the poorest and most deserving sections of our society at a time when they need the greatest help.

Despite the timing of the press release, the money announced is not being used to build mental health support. Instead it is an expansion of an existing IAPT-based scheme providing, as the announcement states, '*combined psychological treatment and employment support to help [people] to remain in, return to or find work and improve their mental health*'<sup>1</sup>. The linking of work and mental health, however, is deeply problematic. In 2015, hundreds of counsellors, psychotherapists and academics opposed the pilot scheme that first put together Jobcentre employment advisors and IAPT therapists, a scheme that in a letter to the Guardian<sup>2</sup> the signatories denounced as anti-therapeutic and professionally unethical.

Nothing has changed except that this policy now threatens to coerce a greater number of people into a system of employability interventions and psychological treatment in order to avoid sanctions on their welfare payments, including the main disability grants. As the highly contested Universal Credit programme is rolled out across the UK in response to rapidly growing low pay and job insecurity, many more people will be unable to secure living wages and will be forced into the benefits regime, where they will be subject to this pressure to undergo combined psychological interventions and employment advice.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/122-million-employment-boost-for-people-receiving-mental-health-support>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/apr/17/austerity-and-a-malign-benefits-regime-are-profoundly-damaging-mental-health>

What is the role of therapists in such a system? For us, work is not a health outcome. Employment is not an expected or even inherently desirable result of genuine counselling and psychotherapy. Real therapy does not aim to return individuals to the workplace or to keep them in jobs that may be economically insecure, psychologically toxic, systemically oppressive and personally damaging.

The linking of State therapy and employment advice, particularly if connected in any way with a punitive benefits system that has the power to sanction claimants for their perceived failures to find work, must surely contaminate some of the central tenets of good therapy – not least the autonomy and right to self-determination of the person undertaking it. The rolled-out scheme may be trailed as ‘voluntary’ but if *‘employment advisers and therapists will work together so that a person can return to or find work easier and faster’*, as the Government say, then the non-coercive integrity of the therapy cannot realistically be maintained.

Given that the Government statement is at pains to point out how the overall aim of the project is *‘driving economic growth’*, we also have to ask therapists whether they can – ethically and in good faith – align their practices with such an agenda. The therapist’s job is not to work from an assumption that ‘work is good’ or to aim to reduce the number of people receiving benefits, including disability benefits that are increasingly claimed on the basis of mental illness, but to provide an opportunity for reflection on all aspects of a person’s life.

As a network of organisations representing counsellors and psychotherapists, we at PCP believe that this announcement on World Mental Health Day is a cynical attempt to reduce government spending at the expense of people who most need genuine therapeutic support during an unprecedented period of economic crisis. We reject the financial logic that underpins the linking of employment and wellbeing services as it is a profound attack on the principles of talking therapies and will lead to a cruel and measurable deepening of the UK’s mental health crisis.

### **Partners for Counselling & Psychotherapy**

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