Universal Credit In-work Progression: Using the capability approach to explore shared values and constrained choices among policymakers, frontline workers and low-income families

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Abstract

Universal Credit (UC) is a major welfare reform in the UK. Its in-work progression element departs from previous policies by introducing conditionality rules previously reserved for unemployed people to low-income workers. In return for UC support, they are required to increase their earnings.

This thesis uses the capability approach as an analytical lens to explore how policymakers designing policies, frontline workers implementing them, and low-income families experiencing the policy in their everyday lives conceptualise progression. It aims to understand how the policy could be improved by considering everyday spatial realities and by recognising how capabilities are enabled and constrained at each stage of the policy process.

The research is based on qualitative interviews with policymakers and low-income parents claiming UC, as well as secondary analysis of interviews with frontline workers. The thesis differs from existing research by comparing views of progression across all three groups of research participants. It finds that all three groups believe in an ideal holistic and human-centred in-work progression policy that includes paid and unpaid work, care, and other meaningful activities. However, their abilities to design, implement or experience this ideal are found to be constrained in different ways. Policymakers feel unable to bring multi-dimensional goals and measures of progression into a narrow and abstract policy process, while frontline workers feel constrained by inflexible rules, lack of time and large caseloads. Low-income families feel unable to balance the requirement to earn more with established family responsibilities anchored in time and space, and do not think working more will lead to progression and greater well-being.

The thesis illustrates how policies develop contexts that define people's capabilities whether they design, deliver or experience them. To avoid policy mismatches, it recommends including the perspectives of individuals and families embedded in everyday geographies to facilitate a capability-based in-work progression policy.

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List of Abbreviations

AET	Administrative Earnings Threshold
ALMP	Active Labour Market Policies
CA	The Capability Approach
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CC	Claimant Commitment
CET	Conditionality Earnings Threshold
CM	Case Manager
CSJ	Centre for Social Justice
CTC	Child Tax Credit
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
HB	Housing Benefit
HMRC	His Majesty's Revenue and Customs
IS	Income Support
JCP	Jobcentre Plus
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
JSAg	Jobseeker's Agreement
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
NMW	National Minimum Wage
PIP	Personal Independence Payment
RTI	Real Time Information (data)
SMC	Social Mobility Commission
UC	Universal Credit
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
WC	Work Coach
WFI	Work Focused Interview
WTC	Working tax Credit

1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore how capabilities are enabled and constrained for people involved in designing, developing, implementing and experiencing the Universal Credit (UC) welfare reform in the UK. UC aims to "simplify the benefit system and make work pay" (DWP, 2010b p.2). The UC in-work progression policy requires low-income workers to increase their earnings in return for government support. This it is believed will help people live more prosperous lives "independent from the welfare state" (DWP, 2016, p.1; McGregor-Smith, 2021). Critics of the policy on the other hand believe it does not reflect everyday lives for UC claimants and exposes fundamental policy mismatches (Millar and Bennett, 2017; Dwyer and Wright, 2020; Scullion, Jones and Wright, 2022).

This thesis uses Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) (Sen, 1985; 1988; 1999) to analyse this policy shift from three perspectives: policy design, policy delivery and everyday geographical experiences amongst low-income families with dependent children. In alignment with Sen's beliefs (1993, p.30) capabilities are understood as more than income, wealth, or resources. Instead, it is the composite set of choices that determines what actions people have the opportunities to pursue as their live their lives (Sen, 1993, 1999). Using Sen's capability approach contributes to a growing field of intersectional geographical approaches within the topic of 'everyday geographies'. In this thesis the UC in-work progression policy is shown to create the contexts that define what capabilities are available to those subject to the policy as well as those designing and implementing it.

Until the introduction of UC there was a clear policy and administrative distinction in the UK between people out-of-work and people in-work. The out-of-work group has been subject to ever tighter benefit requirements over the past two decades (Dwyer and Wright, 2014, 2020). These requirements have been introduced and administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and its network of local Jobcentres. The in-work group has until the inception of UC faced few requirements in return for financial top-up of their low earnings. They have also largely experienced 'hands-off' administrative engagement from HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) (Bennett, 2012;

Clegg; 2015). UC merges these two groups within the 'single working age' UC administrative system, and both groups are exposed to an ever-increasing demand to work or work more (Jones and Kumar, 2022).

The thesis contributes to the existing knowledge by examining this policy shift through in-depth qualitative interviews with fifteen policymakers and fifteen low-income parents with dependent children claiming UC, plus secondary analysis of interviews with twenty frontline Jobcentre Plus workers. This journey through the whole policymaking process adds a significant contribution to the literature. The thesis also places the policy rationale empirically within the temporal and socio-spatial relations of everyday lives of low-income families. Emphasis is placed on people's experiences of the policy and how it influences their decisions about where, when and how much to work when faced with the requirements to 'progress' by earning more (DWP, 2020b; 2023b). Placing families at the centre of these policy changes allows the thesis to look at micro-level everyday experiences whilst also exposing the intersection between macro-level policy assumptions and spatial and temporal borders and everyday 'coordination dilemmas' (Jarvis, 2011; Pimlott-Wilson and Hall, 2017). The capability approach is used as an analytical framework to first separately explore the views and experiences of policymakers, frontline workers and UC claimants, before bringing their views together at the end. The thesis unearths how the UC in-work progression policy creates contexts that both enable and restricts each groups' capabilities in different ways.

The thesis discusses the current policy within the context of policy developments taking place over the last twenty-five years. This period has seen an increasing shift from more universal social security schemes in favour of more means testing and 'active labour market policies' (ALMP) (Clasen and Clegg, 2011). This policy change has been accompanied by a shift in institutional organisation and terminology: from the Department of Social Security to the Department for Work and Pensions; and from 'social security benefits' to 'welfare benefits', adopting both the terminology and policy interventions more commonly associated with the United States (Walker, 2005). In order to align with the language used in official publications, the thesis adopts the term 'welfare' to refer to policies and programmes introduced and delivered through the UK tax and benefit system. Subsequently, 'benefits' or 'welfare benefits' refer to cash

payments made through these programmes whether they are means tested (such as UC) or not.

ALMPs focus on the perceived need to 'activate' the unemployed by demanding participation in various compulsory initiatives (Clasen and Mascaro, 2022; Jones and Kumar, 2022). In the UK the receipt of benefits has increasingly been linked to the individual responsibility to seek paid work mandated through a process of 'creeping conditionality' where more and more groups have been included into the dominant rhetoric of paid work as the 'duty of the responsible citizen' (Deacon, 2004; Dwyer, 2004; Standing, 2011; Patrick, 2012; Wiggan, 2012; Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Dwyer et al., 2019). UC in-work progression is the latest stage in the activation and welfare evolution (Wright and Dwyer, 2020). Chapter two discusses how this policy builds on reforms introduced by successive governments since the mid-1990s which have all adopted economic growth and increased individual earnings as the main goal of policies leading to a current emphasis characterised by Jones (2022) as 'work first then work more'.

UC in-work progression is based on assumptions that increased earnings will lead people to better lives. Other elements of people's lives, such as care, leisure time, communal activities, social relationships, local labour markets and ecological environments have been squeezed out of the welfare policy debate (Coyle et al., 2013). The CA provides a helpful lens through which to critically reflect on UC assumptions and experiences and challenges the narrow assumption that increased individual earnings and economic growth is the end goal of policy (Sen, 1985; Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2017). In order to achieve greater well-being and prosperity Sen calls for more nuance in the policy process, multiplicity in policy outcomes and measures, and for government actions to reflect what people value being and doing (Sen 1993; 1999). Policies should provide the resources that people need and the freedom to convert these resources in ways they value to achieve real progress (Sen, 1985). Sen's capability approach has been adopted by many academics and expanded its reach following Sen's original work (Alkire, 2002, 2005; Nussbaum 2000, 2011; Robeyns 2017). This thesis will first and foremost focus on some of the arguments originally put forward by Sen, specifically in relation to values and freedom of choice (Sen, 1985; 1988, 1999). This leads to a discussion of what activities are considered and measured as valuable in welfare policies, a discussion which has also crept into

contemporary economic thinking (Mazzacuto, 2016; Cooper et al., 2023; Coyle et al., 2023) although a detailed view of that economic debate is outside of the scope of this thesis.

The remainder of this chapter contains four sections. First, to fully understand the UC in-work progression policy it is necessary to briefly place the policy, and this research, within a historical context of shifting welfare landscapes and economic austerity in the UK. Second, the rationale for adopting the CA as an analytical framework of the thesis is briefly introduced which presents the underlying interdisciplinary thinking behind the thesis. Third, the reasons for focussing on both policymakers and low-income parents with children are discussed and the research questions presented. Finally, the thesis structure is outlined.

1.1 Policy context and rationale

UC was introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government in 2010 as a cornerstone of their welfare reform agenda, although the policy rationale can be traced further back (Grover, 2007; Bennett, 2012; Sainsbury, 2014). It provides a new single system of means-tested support for working-age households who are in or out of work. It thereby aims to create “one working age benefit system that, through its structure and implementation, will change people’s behaviour and attitudes in such a way that that they will stay in work for longer, work more hours and thereby earn more and exit poverty” (DWP, 2010b, p. 1, 2012a, 2012b). Although elements of UC can be traced back to earlier periods in welfare policy development this thesis looks at the past three decades. It roots UC in policy principles introduced from the mid-1990s, in particular the introduction of the Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) in October 1996 at the very end of John Major’s Conservative government. JSA constituted a major change to the welfare system at the time by introducing stricter eligibility rules and increasing the emphasis and active focus on seeking work (McKnight et al. 2000; Manning, 2009). The principles of stricter activation enforcement were thereafter adopted by the New Labour Government when they came to power in 1997 and introduced a series of New Deal programmes for different groups of out of work benefit claimants. The New Deal policies were characterised by ‘rights and responsibilities’ and work was seen as the best way to escape poverty. In the early years of the New Labour administration the focus on paid work was accompanied by an emphasis on ‘opportunities for all’ with

some recognition that working may not be best for everyone in all situations (DSS, 1998; DfEE, 2001; Finn, 2000, 2005). The emphasis on work first did however dominate the latter parts of the New Labour welfare policies (DWP, 2007 2008). New Labour's desire to create employment opportunities for people that were out of work for a number of different reasons led to a complicated and fragmented welfare policy landscape with a plethora of New Deal programmes. Alongside these, New Labour introduced tax credits that topped-up earnings for parents and low-paid workers. This resided administratively in HMRC and was conceptually not considered as 'welfare' (Clegg, 2015). From this politically and administratively fragmented landscape of new welfare policies arose an increased focus on activation and conditionality (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). During the latter half of the 2000s the focus on activation was increasingly underpinned by a principle of simplifying the benefit system.

The idea of a single working age benefit system gained both political traction in the second half of the 2000s and was in principle welcomed by organisations advocating on behalf of welfare recipients (Grover, 2007; Millar and Bennett, 2017). This consensus was seized upon by the Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government which built on the foundations of New Labours' earlier concepts and introduced UC as a simpler administrative system, and a policy alternative to a complex unemployment, tax credit and housing benefit landscape (DWP, 2010). However, this thesis discusses how the focus on simplification fails to account for multi-dimensional lives and places and excludes nuance from the policymaking process. The thesis uncovers how this policy mismatch is particularly marked within the policy of UC in-work progression. The thesis will show that the policy takes a very narrow view of progression which is understood simply as 'increased earnings' (McGregor-Smith, 2021). The policy measures do not include outcomes or interventions related to broader context such as training and education or financial incentives largely acknowledged as integral elements of employment advancement (Hendra et al. 2011; DWP 2020b), nor does it include outcomes or measures related to people's everyday activities outside of paid work.

Furthermore, UC was developed and implemented in the context of economic austerity policies that were introduced in several countries after the 2008-9 financial crisis but have arguably gone further and deeper in the UK than elsewhere (Hall, Pimlott-Wilson and Horton, 2020; Farnsworth, 2021). Austerity policies have had far

reaching consequences in many policy fields, but for this thesis the reduction in both welfare eligibility and generosity together with an erosion of local support in many towns and cities are of particular importance (Gray and Barford, 2018; Farnsworth and Irving, 2021). However, within government, UC was initially better insulated against austerity cuts (Timmins, 2016). As this thesis discusses, this may have led to it being implemented in a culture that failed to listen to concerned voices and acknowledge diverse evidence.

As well as exposing the policy mismatch between assumed and actual everyday geographical lives the thesis discusses how policymakers and people claiming UC share many similar values and desires when it comes to balancing work, care and other activities that are meaningful to them. They also share views about where and how much they would like to work, and what 'progression' means on an individual scale. The thesis demonstrates how these values fail to enter the policy design because policymakers feel constrained in their capabilities to translate such values into the policy process. Frontline workers likewise feel constrained in delivering UC in accordance with similar values and believes. This results in people receiving a policy that ignores dominant values, ideas and beliefs, and which does not fit with everyday demands and a desire to live a life according to what one values.

1.2 The capability approach as a conceptual framework for the thesis

The shared values mentioned above relates to the CA which sees people as active agents with ideas and values that guide their behaviour (Alkire, 2002). Central to the CA is the ability of policies to provide the necessary conditions for people to be free to choose what is valuable to them. As a policy tool it is often used as an interdisciplinary framework for analysing human development and economic and social progress (Alkire, 2005). In Sen's own words it is "an intellectual discipline that gives a central role to the evaluations of a person's achievements and freedoms in terms of his or her ability to do the different things a person has reason to value doing or being" (Sen, 2009:16). The concepts of values, freedom and choice are fundamental to the CA which argues that government actions should be judged more in terms of valuable human ends than economic growth, income and utility (Sen, 1985; 1999). Well-being

is fundamental to the CA and is commonly used interchangeably with quality of life (Robeyns, 2017).

The CA is therefore a normative framework that focuses on what people are able to do and be, referred to as their capabilities. While Sen never explicitly discussed specific capabilities, he refers to diverse activities such as having a decent job, enjoying leisure activities, the ability to learn, live a life free from violence and persecution, good health etc (Sen 1985; 1993; 1999: Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2017). He challenges dominant economic theories and highlights the limitations of utility and preference satisfaction in driving individual behaviour (Sen, 1985; Kleine 2013; Cooper et al., 2023). The CA expands the variables and influences driving people's behaviour, and advocates for more multi-layered information to guide policy goals, policy processes and policy outcomes. Policies should give a central role to people's freedoms and choices which Sen believes will lead to greater well-being (Sen, 1993). As well as information pluralism, the CA endorses value pluralism and recognises that different people in different places need different kinds and amounts of resources in order to achieve a good quality of life (Robeyns, 2017). This multi-layered and human centred approach acknowledges that well-being is not the only concern for policymakers but allows for sub-elements of policies to come to the fore and challenges narrow policy aims through its diverse approach.

In chapter two the thesis outlines how the CA questions the rationale that increased earnings will lead to greater well-being for everyone in all circumstances. It does this by investigating what people value doing and being. What are their goals, and why? Furthermore, how are they enabled or constrained by social, economic, personal and institutional factors to achieve their goals? Fundamentally the CA acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of people and places. The thesis shows that policymakers, frontline workers and families experiencing the UC in-work progression policy are all constrained in their freedoms to choose actions according to their values. Importantly, they are constrained in different ways depending on their individual institutional, social and economic contextual environments. The thesis will show how policymakers have the freedom to choose the location and intensity of their work given enabling structures, but how they are constrained in their freedom to embed the same values into the policy narrative, policy interventions and policy measures due to constraining institutional environments and established norms of the policy process. Low-income parents

claiming UC on the other hand are constrained in their opportunities to choose a life according to similar values and are also constrained in achieving a good life due to the narrow and one-dimensional concept of progression that does not allow for a contextual dimension of well-being to feature.

Using the CA as a lens for looking at the UC in-work progression policy allows this thesis to question the narrow definition of the policy goal and investigate the constraining factors in delivering and achieving the desired policy outcomes. It also suggests alternative ways of measuring progression in line with what both policymakers and people experiencing the policy would value.

1.3 Research questions

This section outlines the research questions and the focus of the thesis. Although the knowledge generated from these questions extends in relevance to all aspects of UC, analysing the policy of in-work progression allows a focus on a particular shift in welfare policy direction: the change from out-of-work activation to in-work activation. The impact this has on working parents with dependent children, who arguably are already carefully balancing paid work and unpaid care (Andersen, 2019, 2023; Wright, 2023), forms the foundation for analysing the extension of the policy rhetoric and intent. The research questions aim to examine how those designing welfare policies, those delivering them, and those experiencing the policy conceptually understand the term ‘progression’ as an abstract concept as well as a relative element of their own quality of life and well-being.

The questions analyse similarities and differences in what progression means for different policy actors. They ask what strategies for working or working more are adopted by those designing policies and those experiencing them and how these strategies are influenced by temporal-spatial factors, local labour market opportunities and the nature of their jobs. They investigate how the UC in-work progression concept is a case of shared values of what good work and a good life looks like but how different constraints hinder these values to be part of both policy design and policy delivery. The questions unearth how this leads to a policy disconnect between assumed and experienced ‘progression’. They are intended to improve knowledge and enable

conversations about an important and new element of the UK welfare landscape. Finally, they emphasise interdisciplinary learning by amalgamating economic, social and geographical concepts, theories and analytical frameworks.

The research asks:

1. How do policymakers understand the concept of progression? In what ways does that align with the view of in-work progression in the UC policy? How do they think extending welfare conditionality to those already in work will lead to progression for low-income parents?

2. How is the UC in-work progression policy delivered by frontline workers? In what ways does that change and shape the policy?

3. How do families claiming UC experience in-work progression? What strategies do they currently use to balance work, care and other activities? How are these strategies shaped by temporal-spatial relationships and the local economic, social and geographic context?

4. What does 'good work' and good quality of life look like for both policymakers and people claiming UC? What values do they share and what opportunities and freedoms do they have to pursue progression in ways that align with their values?

1.4 Outline of the thesis

The next eight chapters of the thesis are structured as follows.

Chapter two sets out the analytical framework using the CA as a lens through which the current narrow policy concept is discussed. This chapter draws out key limitations of the current policy rhetoric.

Chapter three looks at the policy background and the economic context in which it was implemented.

Chapter four explains the rationale for the choice of a qualitative approach and describes the data and methods used across the thesis. It also discusses the researchers' positionality in relation to this research.

Chapters five, six, seven and eight contain the empirical work of the thesis and, collectively, explore the research questions.

Chapter five discusses policymakers' understanding of progression and the role of ideas and values in policymaking. Policymakers have been accused of being too disconnected from the reality of people's lives due to a conceptual and physical spatial void in the policymaking process (Slater, 2022). Whether this is due to lack of knowledge, lack of evidence, or inability to convert that knowledge and evidence into policy measures is the focus in this chapter. It demonstrates that 'progression' can mean a number of things in policymakers' own lives including 'non-economic' ones. However, when these values and aspirations are translated into policy the concept becomes narrow, abstract and disconnected from everyday geographic lives of people experiencing the policy.

Chapter six provides a rare insight into the frontline of UC policy implementation. It looks at how the UC in-work progression policy is understood and delivered by frontline workers and exposes tensions between frontline workers' values, their understanding of progression, and their freedom to deliver UC according to these values. The chapter adds to existing literature by delving deeper into why and how frontline discretion takes place. The frontline workers interviewed did not work in the same locations where the UC participants lived. Hence, there is no direct link between people's experience of receiving services and the accounts of the individual frontline worker. However, their stories carry many similarities and expose both an 'implementation gap' between policy design and delivery, and a 'reality gap' between everyday lives and a Jobcentre culture charged with implementing a disciplining policy (Fletcher and Wright, 2018).

Chapter seven focuses on everyday geographic experiences of UC. It looks at tensions between people's motivations and values in relation to paid and unpaid work and the policy requirement to increase their earnings. This chapter discusses whether low-income parents with children have real freedom to act in accordance with their values and what matters to them. It demonstrates how parents want to balance paid

work and care, to make choices about how much and where to work, and in ways that fit with their local environments and support networks. It also discusses how UC policy structures reduce people's capabilities rather than enhance them. The chapter uses narrative stories to illustrate individual experiences of 'life on UC' and how elements of the policy in general, and the in-work progression policy in particular, constrain freedoms in varying ways. Ultimately the chapter discusses how the UC in-work progression policy only values formal paid employment whilst ignoring other meaningful and unpaid activities such as care and community engagement.

Chapter eight examines in-work progression in the context of well-being and quality of life. It focusses on the narrow policy requirement of earning more and discusses how the quality of that work, the availability of it in areas where people live, and how it fits with the rest of people's life, is largely absent from the policy narrative. The chapter places the concept of in-work progression within a context of
changes in the nature of work and rising in-work poverty over the past two decades. It includes a discussion about what participants in this research considered 'good work'. A spatial investigation how the biggest problem may not be finding (any) work but finding work that actually make people better off and is not low paid or precarious.

Finally, chapter nine presents conclusions and discusses implications of the thesis for policy and future research. Ultimately the thesis demonstrates how the in-work progression policy objectives and policymaker's assumptions are disconnected from everyday life on low income. The disconnect is rooted in a policy emphasis on individual behaviour that ignores household or wider social and geographical factors. The disconnect is also based in a narrow policy goal of 'increased earnings' and a short-term policy horizon concerned with fiscal constraints rather than longer-term investments in communities and human lives. Finally, the disconnect displays a fundamental mismatch in failing to acknowledge how the concept of 'progression' means different things to different people in different places.
The thesis concludes by exploring how the CA could be included in the policy process whereby capability-based welfare policies could emerge (Yerkes et al.2019). Future research could build on this knowledge and explore how capability-based policies would have more holistic and human centred policy goals that are underpinned by multi-dimensional policy measures. Future research could also explore what more

diverse sets of voices could bring to the policymaking process and whether this could help close the gap between assumed and lived reality of UC in-work progression.

2 Conceptual framework - developing welfare capabilities in everyday time and space

2.1 Introduction

This thesis applies the economic and philosophical thinking of Amartya Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1981, 1985, 1988, 1993, 1999; Alkire, 2002, Robeyns, 2017) as a lens for analysing the UC in-work progression policy. The CA allows for an interdisciplinary approach to studying human behaviour and evaluate policies (Alkire, 2002, Robeyns, 2017). It is therefore well suited to looking at a policy shift that brings a larger number and more diverse group of people under the one roof of UC policy requirements. The CA advocates for more holistic and human centred policy development (Sen 1999; Alkire, 2002, 2005; Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017). However, applying the CA to the UC in-work progression policy reveals how the policy rhetoric and assumptions are individualistic, narrow in scope and based on abstract assumptions about people's everyday geographic lives. These assumptions lead to a policy disconnect that hinders people's progression and reduces their well-being.

This chapter conceptualises what capability-based policy design, implementation and experience might look like, and combines this with geographical concepts of time and space in order to explore everyday policy realities. It outlines how the CA is a useful framework for critically examining the policy from three perspectives: policy design, policy implementation and everyday policy experience. Applying the CA as an analytical framework exposes how capabilities are enabled and constrained in different ways throughout the policy process.

The first section of this chapter outlines the core elements of the CA. The chapter then uses the CA as a lens to examine the UC in-work progression policy design and conceptualises what a more capability-based policy design might look like. Following core principles of the CA this section focusses on the space for pluralism in policy development with particular focus on the need for multidimensional goals and measures. The penultimate section adds time and space as a theoretical lens for envisioning a capability-based in-work progression policy. Finally, the chapter

concludes by outlining how the CA could provide an alternative approach to current welfare policy development.

2.2 The capability approach

2.2.1 Holistic human centred approach to policy and analysis

The CA is both a normative analytical framework underpinned by philosophical and economic theories of social justice and development (Robeyns, 2009), as well as an evaluative framework for individual welfare and social arrangements (Sen, 1993). It advocates for an interdisciplinary approach to studying human behaviour (Alkire, 2002, Robeyns, 2017) and is commonly used to advocate for more human centred policy development in the fields of economics, education, health and human rights (Alkire, 2002; 2005; Robyens, 2017). Especially relevant to this thesis is how the CA might offer alternative approaches to develop labour market and welfare policies (Orton, 2011).

The CA was developed by the economist Amartya Sen in the late 1970s and early 1980s as an alternative to utility based economic theories (Kleine, 2013; Robeyns, 2017). Where more dominant economic theories focus on economic growth and increased income as explicit policy goals and the basis for human welfare (Cooper et al., 2023), Sen views economic growth as a means to an end goal of human development, not an end in itself (Sen, 1981, 1985, 1988). He argues that in order to allow people to thrive, growth needs to be complemented with human development in a number of other spheres, such as education, health, community participation etc (Sen, 1981, 1993, 1999, 2009, Stiglitz et. al 2010). Human well-being is central to the CA and is often used interchangeably with quality of life (Robeyns, 2017, 2020). Ultimately Sen argues the CA is “an intellectual discipline that gives a central role to the evaluation of a person’s achievements and freedoms in terms of his or her ability to do the different things a person has reason to value doing or being” (Sen, 2009, p16). Sen furthermore places emphasis on *achieved* quality of life which is based on the freedom to choose a way of life based on what each person value and has reason to value.

The CA focusses on the flourishing of human lives as something of intrinsic value. It considers people as active and diverse agents, with ideas and values that guide their behaviour. The CA thereby recognises the importance of people's want and their ability and ultimately freedom to pursue the goals that they value in life (Alkire, 2005). This argues the CA, means people should have the freedom to make choices that carries value to the person themselves (Alkire, 2002, 2005, Deneulin et al. 2006, Nussbaum 2011, Robeyns, 2011) but is often ignored by more traditional economic approaches which use income as a proxy for people's preferences (Cooper et al., 2023). Through this human centred approach, the CA challenges the concept that individuals always act according to 'economic rationality' in order to maximise their economic self-interest. In contrast, the CA takes a more holistic view, focussing on wider living conditions being the object of economic development (Sen, 1988).

A central question asked in this thesis is what is valuable to people, and do the resources they have access to enable them to achieve this? Furthermore, do policies focus on and measure what really matters to people? For instance, how does the UC in-work progression policy enable or constrain people in achieving what they value? The following section will delve deeper into the core concepts of the CA in order to better answer these questions.

2.2.2 Functionings, capabilities, freedom and choice

The concepts of capabilities, functionings, freedom and choice are the bedrock of the CA. Sen describes functionings as "the various things a person may value being or doing" (Sen, 1999:75). This includes being well fed, being healthy, having a decent job, taking part in community activities, care for children etc (Sen, 1992, p 39, 1999, p.75; Deneulin et. al. 2006, p 1-2). Capabilities refer to the various combinations of functionings that it is feasible to achieve (Sen, 1992, p.40; Comim et al., 2008). Functionings are "outcomes or achievements whereas capabilities are the real opportunity to achieve valuable states of being and doing" (Robeyns, 2006, p. 78).

Capabilities can also be understood as end goals, whilst resources, and the conversion of resources, are the means needed to reach capabilities of value (Robeyns, 2017). Alkire (2002) outlines how Sen believed in the need to understand what communities value and aspire to as individuals, families and collective entities,

with a strong focus on the reason for these aspirations. The conversion of resources into functionings and capabilities therefore varies and rely on different people's freedom and opportunities (Comim et al. 2008, p.3). A person's capability reflects their freedom or (real) opportunity to choose one type of life or another. Reduced capability would mean lack of such freedoms or opportunities (Sen, 1985, Robeyns, 2017).

The CA suggests people should be seen as more than simply recipients of policy interventions. Instead, they should be considered active agents in shaping their own lives. Policies should provide opportunities that give people freedom and choice to act in accordance with what matters to them and in accordance with what they value and have reason to value (Alkire, 2002, 2005). For Sen agency is to empower and give voice to people in order to bring about change (Sen 1999, p.19). The principle of reasoning and having the freedom to choose what carries value is fundamental to Sen's original philosophy. Although, such reasoning is assumed to be following the rule of law and basic human rights (Sen, 1999).

The focus of this thesis is both on the role of individuals, and also the role of social and geographical structures, which may enable or constrain people's freedom to be and do what they value. In particular, the thesis examines whether people receiving UC have the resources and the ability to convert these resources, in order to progress how they value within the context of place, social relationships and the social institution of the UC in-work progression policy. In addition, This thesis applies the lens of the CA to those designing and implementing policies and analyses their freedom to act in accordance with their own values and ideas.

Sen argues that there is no definitive list of functionings or capabilities as different sets of functionings will be relevant to different groups of people in different settings (Sen 2005, p. 157-160) and therefore a defined lists run counter to the essence of a holistic approach to human well-being (Alkire, 2005). Martha Nussbaum on the other hand made a prominent departure from Sen's "deliberate incompleteness" (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993, p.47) by developing a list of central human capabilities as the foundations of social justice theory (Nussbaum, 2000; 2011). Whilst Sen has collaborated closely with Nussbaum, he departs from this approach believing that different people in different places have reason to value different things.

Arguably, a defined list of capabilities may lend itself easier to policy development and measurement. For example, the CA has formed the basis for policy frameworks for human and economic development such as the first United Nation's Human Development Index (UNDP, 1990). More recently New Zealand's Living Standards Framework has adopted similar principles of multi-dimensional policy interventions and outcome measures (Gleisner et al., 2012). This thesis is aligned to Sen's approach of holistic policy goals and measures, but it also acknowledges that some pre-defined policy categories eases policy implementation. Importantly, the CA advocates for plurality of voices. This includes local people's policy experiences in defining policy goals. In such situations (some) definitions of capabilities may help bring about more CA based welfare policies.

The next section will look at the role of resources and trade-offs which are central elements to the CA and also to policy design and policy development.

2.2.3 Converting resources into capabilities

When used as a lens through which to empirically analyse a specific policy, functionings tend to be understood as acts that people do in order to meet a goal (Sen, 2005). For example, people may choose to work in order to earn an income. However, whether that work is of decent quality and provides income that leads to greater well-being is the real question for the capability approach. Income has 'instrumental value' as a means to an end but is not considered to have value in itself. Capabilities and functionings on the other hand have 'intrinsic value' (Comim et al., 2008, p.10). In terms of UC in-work progression an individual may for example not consider the policy goal of increased earnings as having value in itself. Increased earnings cannot necessarily provide progression that is meaningful or valuable to that person unless it also generates greater well-being and better quality of life. A person's state of well-being depends on a number of factors: such as the quality of work; the location of the work; whether the activity of working more, in order to generate the extra income, is meaningful, enjoyable and satisfactory; and whether the extra income generates other things of value to an individual, such as the means to go on holiday, buy a car, take part in leisure activities, and other functionings that may previously have been unobtainable.

For Sen achieved functionings is what matters, and they can be an observable achievement, such as achieving a desired job, or it can be an unobservable achievement, such as be able to speak freely without fear (Stiglitz et al., 2010). Resources, and the availability to convert these resources into valuable activities, are therefore important in allowing people the means to fully participate in activities they see valuable. Robeyns (2002) describes how an individual is able to convert resources is dependent on two conversion factors; i) personal characteristics such as health and educational skills, and ii) social characteristics such as infrastructure, institutions, social norms etc. (p.5). She uses these conversion factors as an argument to look holistically at someone's circumstances in order to fully examine and try to understand someone's behaviour.

When discussing poverty alleviation, the CA does not dismiss inequality. However, it would argue the question would not simply be redistribution for the sake of equality per se, it would be to redistribute resources in order to enable poorer people to fully participate in society and pursue a quality of life that they value and have reason to value. As a discipline the CA is less vocal and specific about people who may choose not to convert resources into actions that could improve their life and/or the life of those around them.

In this thesis, important functionings for both policymakers and UC families are the ability to undertake paid and un-paid work, care for children or elderly relatives and the ability to take part in community or leisure activities. Together these functionings make up the capability of meaningful lives for both groups of research participants. Welfare policies are the institutional frameworks that enable or constrain an individual or a group of individuals to move to such as state where they can find a balance between work, care and other community and leisure activities. Isola et al. (2022) find that the Finnish social security system force people to trade off individual capabilities such as financial independence (through work) with time autonomy (to allow care). In the UK, Burchardt (2010) looks at what combination of disposable income and free time can be achieved by different groups of people. Such trade-offs are discussed in the context of families experiencing Universal Credit in chapter seven.

The thesis also discusses how policymakers make similar trade-offs. However, where they are surrounded by enabling social structures and institutions that expand their capability sets, people experiencing UC in their everyday lives found their capability space shrinking through the welfare policies they were subjected to. The focus of the next section of this chapter is how the CA applies to welfare policies.

2.3 The capability approach, Universal Credit and 'welfare to work'

2.3.1 Multi-dimensional goals and measures

The previous sections of this chapter have outlined key concepts of the CA and how these have formed the basis of theoretical knowledge. The next section of this chapter first takes an overarching look at how the CA advocates for pluralism in the information base that policies are anchored in. The chapter then 'zooms in' on how this applies to the UC in-work progression policy.

Sen's early work on human development observed and critiqued the narrow approach of using GDP growth as the main measure of a country's state of development (Kleine, 2013). The CA argues that basing policy development on and measuring outcomes by economic growth alone does not provide enough nuance of what people value and what drives human behaviour. Instead, policies need to be anchored in broader information bases to capture the diversity of human life and measured through multiple indices (Stiglitz et. al., 2010). Sen does emphasise that economic growth plays as an important but not exclusive role and that the end goals of well-being and quality of life relies as much on social relations and the environment in which people live (Kleine, 2013, p.20).

The state of a nation's economy is often illustrated through labour market statistics of employment and unemployment. These measures often translate into binary view of employment being 'good and unemployment 'bad' and fails to include a number of factors that are important in understanding the role of paid work in people's lives. In contrast the CA offers a broader and more holistic understanding of the capabilities and functionings associated with employment and can be a tool for policymakers to

not simply evaluate what is happening in the labour market but also generate prospective policies (Comim et al., 2008).

Arguably any policy development and evaluation depends on the data available to monitor and measure outcomes. The former French President Nicholas Sakozy noted how an economic growth narrative based on statistical averages was 'out of sync' with citizens' experiences of life and argued that this disconnect would "forge beliefs and build decisions based on data that is increasingly divorced from real life" (Stiglitz et al., 2010, p. xiv). In response the CA was used to help find alternative measures that moved away from the focus on GDP growth and instead argued for the adoption of composite and multiple metrics that capture the complexities and multi-faceted nature of people's lives in order to better understand what actually contributes to people's quality of life (Stiglitz et al., 2010, p.xvii). This gap, or disconnect, between people's own experiences of their life and that which policies emphasise, or policymakers assume, is discussed in this thesis. People's experiences are anchored in what they know is happening – not what the government, or aggregate statistics, is telling them is happening. One question raised in this thesis is whether acknowledging this gap in lived and assumed life and making UC policy objectives and measures more accurately reflect people's everyday geographic experiences, can lead to an understanding of progression that goes beyond simply increased earnings.

In the UK today, employment rates are historically high which masks a growing problem of in-work poverty as well as underemployment and economic inactivity. When looking beyond the employment/unemployment numbers it becomes clear that undertaking paid work is no guarantee for escaping poverty (Finch, 2016; TUC, 2016; Taylor, 2017; D'Arcy and Finch, 2017; Tomlinson, 2018; TUC, 2021). UC in-work progression is currently the main policy for reducing in-work poverty (DWP, 2016, 2021). However, by focussing solely on increased earnings the policy ignores how the quality of work matters as much as the quantity of work if poverty is really to be reduced.

The CA exposes the lack of functionings and reduced capabilities that result from low-quality work (Sehnbruch, 2008:564). Understanding the capabilities of a job that an individual has reason to value is necessary for understanding individual decision making about whether to work or not; how much to work and where to work. In short,

we need to define employment, including progression in employment, in a manner that reflects concepts beyond income generation. Bueno (2021) discusses three dimensions of work through the lens of the CA: capabilities through work; capabilities in work and capabilities for work – especially for meaningful work (p.2). In particular, he distinguishes between capability enhancing and capability reducing work (ibid. p.4). These dimensions are discussed in the context of whether people actually feel 'better off in work' as advocated by UC in chapter eight.

Although Sen's original writing is from an economist's perspective, it distances itself from more market driven economic approaches and has contributed to a recent shift towards more normative economic approaches acknowledging the complexities of human behaviour (Coyle et al., 2023). Such complexities are discussed in the context of the UC in-work progression policy below.

2.3.2 Conceptualising a capability-based UC in-work progression policy

Orton (2011) explores whether the CA can offer a framework for thinking differently about work and welfare and argues that the CA can provide a different conceptualization of the purpose and principles of public policy, rather than provide a detailed 'road map' for policymakers to follow (p.352). Others use it as a lens through which to study a particular element of labour market or welfare policies (see for example, Egdell and McQuaid, 2016; Egdell and Graham, 2017; Fernando-Urbano and Orton, 2021; Isola et. al 2022). When thinking about a more capability-based progression policy both approaches can be helpful.

'Independence from the state' is an aim of the UC welfare reform (DWP 2010) wanting people to earn enough to no longer need state top up. However, by incorporating housing, childcare, work and other elements of support for low-income families this is an unlikely scenario for most. Furthermore, from a CA perspective the policy does not give parents the freedom to choose between time and money, working more and being only very slightly better off financially, at the cost of losing time with their children. Isola et al (2020) argue that time poverty restricts parents' capability space (p.10) whilst Burchardt (2010) devises an income-time combination as a measure of someone's

substantive freedom. She demonstrates the importance of time as a measure, together with income, to assess a person's substantive freedom to pursue goals in life.

Studies show how low-income parents' choices are based on rational decisions based on values and everyday practices (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Williams, 2001). Pratt and Hanson (1991) show that the choices women make about whether to work or not, how much to work, in what type of job and where, is based much more on a combination of domestic care responsibilities and time-space constraints than on a concern about wages and income. They found that the main reason women chose certain jobs was because it was located close to home and had 'good hours'. In the context of UC Griffiths et. al. (2022) show that some parents chose to stop work in favour of full time care due to the difficulties balancing work and care with an unpredictable and stressful UC digital system. This thesis discusses how those policymakers who were also parents, managed to balance their work and family life due to their favourable salary and good quality jobs. Low-paid parents on the other hand were not able to find the same balance and despite working did not feel better off. Using the lens of the capability approach and recognising the tension between the functionalities of work, time and care, one might argue that people's freedom to choose to be both a good parent and a good worker is constrained not just by their individual capabilities but by their relationship to structural capabilities such as the local labour market and the social security system. Orton (2011) argues that reducing people's choice to either low-wage employment or benefit payments cannot enhance people's capabilities nor provide opportunities for people to live flourishing lives.

Within the process of designing and delivering policies policymakers also make trade-offs and often create hierarchies of winners and losers of particular policy ideas (Hill, 2017). Chapter five discusses how policymakers involved in designing UC tried to balance their own personal and broader understanding of progression with the 'official' narrow understanding of progression as expressed in abstract policy documents and instruments. This abstraction has created a conceptual spatial gap between the lived everyday experience of people's 'life on UC' and how policymakers assume people live and make decisions about work (Millar and Bennett, 2017). The nature and location of jobs available to many UC families mean they lack the freedom to choose and achieve the same capabilities for work as the policymakers. Not only does the

policy limit capabilities for meaningful work (Bueno, 2021) it limits parents' opportunity to balance being a 'good worker' and a 'good parent'. Judge (2015) shows that many parents strongly felt it was unfair that low-income families claiming benefits do not have the same freedom to choose how many hours to work compared to families on higher incomes. By abstracting the policy from the lived experience of families, through a process of policy translation (Ingold and Monaghan, 2016), policymakers have created policy structures that constrain people's capabilities and their ability to progress.

UC in-work progression design and implementation only allows for one interpretation of the functionality 'work'. The policy only considers work as formal paid work that is recognisable through the Real Time Information (RTI) data shared between the HMRC and DWP. RTI data is automatically fed into the UC IT system which then decides whether someone has progressed depending on whether that months' earnings have increased or not. Those that are self-employed are not included in this data so are therefore mandated to inform the UC system of their earnings every month. This narrow definition combined with a single data source is the opposite of the CA view that multi-dimensional indices of outcomes based in broad information bases are necessary for capability-based policies (Yerkes et al., 2019).

This section has discussed how shared values about work without access to the same resources lead to unequal opportunities to achieve the capability of meaningful work and progression. Whilst policymakers may be enabled to reach such balance the UC policy design denies low-income families the same choices. Whilst this section has applied the lens of the CA to UC in-work progression at a global level the next section will deepen the analysis by conceptualising a capability-based UC policy within the small-scale everyday lives.

2.3.3 Time and space as multidimensional and relational

To truly understand people's everyday choices policies must seek to understand quality of life as a multi-dimensional concept. For UC in-work progression this includes the need to account for complexities in people's decisions about where, when and how much to work, and who in the family will do the work. Understanding the complex relations that frame such decision-making and understanding the multiple ways that such relations interact is crucial for policies to be capability-based (Yerkes et al., 2019).

Doreen Massey (2005) argues that policies should not be a choice between the local versus the global. It would be more constructive to understand the relationship between the two and especially focus on the interrelationship between space, place, time and power. Massey and Meegan (1978) argue that the spatial affects the temporal in a wide variety of ways but that "there is a tendency for problems to be defined in spatial terms, and, consequently, for the causes of the problem to be sought within the same spatial area" (p. 273). More than four decades on from Massey and Meegans' work the policy solutions are still too often seen in isolation at either the global, structural or individual level. Policies are rarely discussed or developed across all three. For example, employment progression may be bundled up under the 'global umbrellas' of 'inclusive growth', or 'in-work poverty' or 'increased productivity'. Or progression may be seen as a structural problem, for example due to lack of transport links to connect the jobless to jobs. Or finally, as is a tendency for welfare policies, solutions are concentrated at the individual level. Individuals must improve their situation and 'overcome their behavioural deficit' within a welfare system based on strict supervision and mandation as advocated by Lawrence Mead's new paternalism (Mead, 1986, 1997).

However, several studies (see for example Blumenberg 2004; Roy, Tubbs and Burton, 2004; Blaxland, 2013, Millar and Ridge, 2009, 2013, 2020) show there is a multi-dimensional relationship between time, space and employment behaviour. Hanson and Pratt (1991, 1995) illustrate how the differences in choices and strategies that families make in their everyday lives are based on neighbourhood differences in household or community resources, occupational or sector availabilities, parenting orientation and gender roles. In short, the "social, economic and geographical boundaries are overlaid and intertwined" (Hanson and Pratt, 1995 p1). Paid employment decisions cannot therefore be separated from unpaid caring responsibilities or from the neighbourhoods where people live. Furthermore, looking at structural solutions, such as improved transport infrastructure, without looking across at other factors might also lead to policy mismatch. In a small study of a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Sheffield, Buckner and Escott (2009) demonstrate how local investment in transport and retail employment opportunities did little to improve the employment of local residents and instead allowed better skilled people to travel from further afield to access the jobs created in this location.

Whilst the CA has tended to concentrate on the individual more recent capability scholars have been looking at the capabilities of groups (Stewart, 2005) and the capabilities of communities (Tonon, 2018). They argue in different ways for the expansion of the CA approach to include group capabilities and to acknowledge that communities and groups can be a source for well-being (or not). Communities can also enlarge individual capabilities and influence what people value. Sandher (2022) shows that 'place' itself is important for people achieving well-being and better quality of life. More prosperous labour markets are shown to have a positive impact on well-being for everyone in that area, including those with lower levels of skills and/or those in low-paid jobs. The opposite is true for places that have suffered industrial decline over the past three decades, where people have lower life expectancy, lower levels of educational attainment and higher levels of disability benefit receipt than more prosperous places (Beatty and Fothergill, 2017; Rice and Venables, 2021; Sandher, 2022).Taking a place based approach allows this thesis to expose how UC has ignored geographical factors that influence people's ability to create capabilities.

2.4 Limitations and critiques of the capability approach

The CA has been criticised for focussing on individuals and ignoring relational aspects of human life (Robeyns, 2002). Although the CA has at its core the quality of life that an individual is able to live, it also surrounds that individual by other actors such as family, community and environmental factors at the local level, and institutions and social structures at the regional, national or global level. Looking at collective capabilities Ibrahim (2006) introduces the concept of living well together and argues that some capabilities are constructed due to an interactive relationship between individuals and social structures. Isola et al. (2020) found that the interaction with the social security system was important for individual functionality, often in unhelpful ways, whereas neighbourhood and community relationships helped alleviate this unhelpful interaction. The relationship with the local community, or with neighbours has the potential to extend capabilities, for example through opportunities to exchange resources, whether material or immaterial (Millar and Ridge, 2013; Daly and Kelly, 2015). Furthermore, the focus on multi-dimensionality can be seen as a limitation of the CA in that it reduces the focus on re-distribution and inequality between rich and poor (Robeyns, 2002). Dean (2009) criticises it for being rooted in liberal market

economic philosophy which he argues obscures the need to focus on rights rather than capabilities.

It has also been argued that the CA is too vague, too idealistic and too difficult to operationalise (Sugden 1993; Roemer 1996; Dean 2009). Robeyns, (2002) argue this is a misconception of the CA, and that critics are too concerned about having a definitive list of functionalities. In contrast she believes that the strength of the CA, as a policy tool as well as an evaluative approach, is its flexibility and 'multidimensional, fuzzy and ambiguous character of well-being' (p.22). The idealism and individualism of the CA can therefore be considered both a strength and weakness. By focussing specifically on individual's capabilities, rather than average national well-being, Sen attempts to acknowledge that people are different and that the issue is not simply equality, but 'equality of what' (Sen, 1992 p.3). As such Sen would accept that different people in different places would need different resources to have a 'good life'. He therefore rejects a set list of functionalities because he argues that such standards cannot capture someone's opportunity to pursue what one values. Instead, he argues that what matters is 'a person's capability to achieve functions that he or she has reason to value' (ibid. pp 4-5). Sen would also argue that setting specific standards would fail to capture people's real freedom to pursue what they value. For example, he argues that people deprived of real freedoms will often adapt to their circumstances, and thereby adapt and be satisfied with small pleasures or gains (Sen, 1992). He argues that utilitarian economic theories, that focus on people's satisfaction, would simply judge whether people were happy or not, and due to a lack of multidimensional approach would fail to 'see' this constrained desire (ibid). This critique of utilitarian economic approaches lies at the heart of the CA's focus on having objective, holistic and multi-dimensional measures in order to recognise people's freedoms or lack of.

2.5 Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the normative and theoretical framework of the CA and how it relates to this research. The overarching aim of the research is to explore how the UC in-work progression policy reflects experiences, values and beliefs by actors across the policymaking process. In doing so the chapter has outlined three aspects of the CA particularly relevant to this policy.

Firstly, the CA offers an alternative approach of conceptualising progression to that offered by the UC in-work progression policy. UC falls within a 'work first' policy trend that is mainly focused on, and measuring, individual earnings growth as a successful policy outcome. This chapter has discussed the limits of a narrow earnings measure if the aim is to create conditions for escaping poverty and live a life 'independent of the state' (DWP, 2010a, 2010b, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2021). It has specifically outlined the need for a broad evidence base about how people make decisions about work, care and other meaningful activities in order to avoid policies being disconnected from everyday geographic lives (Pimlott-Wilson and Hall, 2017).

Sen and others argue for the need to broaden the base of information used in order to better explain and understand human behaviour. They emphasise the need for multiple metrics or composite measures that will be used to evaluate policy outcomes (Stiglitz et. al, 2010). This chapter has discussed how the current measure of progression is too narrow and fails to take into account of what really matters to people.

Secondly, the chapter has outlined how the CA advocates for a more holistic, nuanced and human centred policy understanding of what matters in people's lives (Alkire, 2005). Using the CA allows us to broaden the objectives of policies as well as incorporating multi-dimensional policy goals. For UC in-work progression this means questioning what the end goal of the policy should be for different people in different places. This nuanced understanding contrasts to the current policy which only allows for a narrow and vertical concept, that does not mirror everyday life of people experiencing the policy. Nor does the policy as imagined enable the capability of policymakers to bring their own, more holistic, understanding of progression into the policy design, nor implement it according to these values on the frontline in Jobcentres. A fundamental question is therefore to what extent a new, more holistic progression goal could better reflect people's actual behaviour, and thereby be more helpful for policymakers as well as those experiencing the policy.

Thirdly, the CA offers a tool to understanding how values and ideas feature in policymaking as well as in families' everyday geographic lives. To better understand what really matters to people when it comes to working, working more and where to work, the CA is used to examine the extent to which the UC in-work progression policy enables or constraints the capability for meaningful work and meaningful progression.

Such meaningful progression would enable people to have substantive freedom to choose a way of life that they value. The CA lens is applied to three policy levels: policy design and its underlying assumptions; policy implementation on the frontline; and everyday geographic experience of the policy. The policy ignores factors that may restrict people's capabilities at all three levels. To really understand how people can achieve progression the policy therefore has to include other aspects of people's lives beyond earnings from formal paid work. The policy itself, and ultimately the policymakers developing and implementing the policy, need to ask; how do people's circumstances help or hinder them in creating a good life? Are they able to have a decent job? Are they able to protect their children from harm? Do they have some degree of choice in their life? In short, using the language of the CA the policy might want to ask what people are able to do or be in order to shape their lives in ways that are valuable to them.

The thesis adds to the body of academic knowledge by applying the lens of the CA across three levels of welfare policymaking. It is also used to conceptualise how policy disconnect may be avoided by allowing broader information and more diverse voices to be heard. This includes putting everyday family life at the centre of welfare policymaking.

3 Policy and Spatial Context

3.1 Introduction

Chapter two introduced the CA as the analytical lens through which three perspectives of the policymaking process is investigated. It discussed how capabilities are enabled and constrained for different people in different ways. To better understand the various ways UC policy structures affects policymakers as well as UC claimants this chapter outlines the policy's development and investigates how it is both a radical departure and a continuation of previous welfare reforms. The chapter further contextualises the choice of the research questions, which investigate the policy experience within temporal-spatial everyday structures and the wider economic 'austerity drive' dominating the welfare policy landscape over the past decade (Hall, 2019a; Farnsworth and Irving, 2021).

The first section of the chapter charts the evolution of UC and briefly sets out key elements of the policy. This is followed by a deeper investigation of the conditionality extension to people in low-paid work and how this extension impacts on families with dependent children. The final section of this chapter situates this policy shift in two areas of Oldham, Greater Manchester, thereby merging the abstract policy assumptions with everyday austere lives of low-income families.

3.2 Universal Credit, wider welfare reform and economic austerity

The Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government introduced UC in 2010 as a cornerstone of their welfare reform agenda (DWP, 2010a, 2010b). The policy aim is to simplify the benefit system and combat worklessness by 'making work pay' (Millar and Bennett, 2017). It has brought together policies for both employed and unemployed people under the administrative roof of DWP and is delivered through a new digital IT system**.** It has replaced six previous benefits. These are three means-tested out of work benefits: Income-Based Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment Support Allowance, and Income Support, and three benefits that previously supplemented low incomes: Housing Benefit, Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. It has thereby provided a new single system of means-tested support for working-age households who are in or out of work.

UC has incorporated many elements of previous welfare policies which will be outlined in more detail in section 3.3.2 below. Among the new elements of the policy is the extension of behavioural conditionality to those already in work but on low-income, which is the focus of this thesis. This policy element extends welfare conditionality to a much wider group of people than previously (Wright and Dwyer, 2020). The thesis looks at this policy shift through the lens of the CA which urges an interdisciplinary approach to policy analysis (Robeyns, 2017, 2020).

The period 2010-19 has been called the 'Austerity Decade' (Ortiz and Cummins, 2021) referring to a period of economic measures and fiscal adjustments emerging in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. Economic austerity policies were introduced to reduce the structural deficit of nation states. In the UK both national and local government budgets have been cut to such an extent that it has not only "undermined the financial base of key parts of the welfare state, it has also reshaped it and redefined its priorities" (Farnsworth, 2021, p.77, Farnsworth and Irving, 2021).

The period 2010-15 saw welfare budget cuts amounting to more than 30 billion pounds (Tucker, 2017; Beatty and Fothergill 2018, 2020a; De Agostini et al. 2018). People of working age were much more affected than other groups by these cuts (Hood and Johnson, 2016; Hills et. al, 2016; Reed, 2020) with families in the bottom earnings decile losing 20% of their net income on average from 2010-19 due to welfare budget changes (Bourquin et al., 2019). However, despite the intention, austerity cuts did not reduce the total welfare expenditure throughout the past decade. Instead, the distribution has shifted away from working-age families to retired older people (Bourquin et al., 2019) where today almost half of the welfare budget is spent on the latter group (OBR, 2021). It was in this context that UC was developed and implemented. UC experiences must therefore be understood within the context of these wider reforms. As Hall (2019a) outlines, in its most basic form austerity encompasses both a reduction in public spending and an everyday experience of "simplicity and self-restraint" (p.2).

A range of welfare reforms were introduced by the 2010 Coalition Government and thereafter extended by the Conservative Government in 2015. These reforms sought to reduce and redistribute the level of public expenditure directed to certain groups of people (Hills et. al, 2016). The benefit cap and the two-child limit, introduced in 2013

and 2017 respectively, notably severs the link between need and reward by limiting the total amount households can receive (Lammasniemi, 2019, Patrick and Andersen, 2022). Other major welfare reforms negatively impacting on people's financial resources include reducing, and from 2015 freezing, benefit uprating, localising council tax support, reducing the local housing allowance, introducing the 'bedroom tax' (spare room subsidy), abolishing the social fund, and replacing Disability Living Allowance (DLA) with a new Personal Independence Payment (PiP). The shift from DLA to PiP is out of scope for this thesis but studies show this change have had negative consequences for a number of people (Harris, 2014, Beatty and Fothergill, 2016). The impact of these cuts has not been evenly distributed across individual people nor geographic spaces. In addition to the specific individual benefit changes listed above, many councils have experienced cuts to local services as a result of reductions in local authority grants (Bailey et al., 2015, Hastings et.al, 2015, Centre for Cities, 2019). Like the welfare cuts described above the Local Authority cuts were unevenly distributed, as described below.

Local authorities in the north of England had by 2017 seen £696 billion public spending reduction compared to £7 billion in the south (Rhodes, 2017). Greater Manchester, the site of much of this research, has experienced £2 billion worth of cuts to its local authorities (Etherington and Jones, 2017, p.18). Hence there are distinct spatial divisions which manifest themselves differently depending on the composition of the local population and the role and importance of welfare benefits for that population (Hamnett, 2008; Beatty and Fothergill (2018, 2020). The impact of welfare reforms is particularly felt in already poor areas due to existing low economic activity, and large proportions of the local population depending on benefits for a variety of reasons (Hamnett, 2014). Furthermore, Hall et al. (2017) outline how women have disproportionally felt the cuts because they "earn less, own less and have more responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work" (p.1)

Although not specific to the UK, the cumulative impact of these benefit changes permeates all aspects of people's lives and illustrate how "austerity becomes entwined within everyday lives and the relationships in which everyday lives are grounded" (Hall, 2019a, p.3; see also Beatty and Fothergill, 2020). Therefore, when aiming to understand the impact of UC on different people in different places we cannot ignore

these wider welfare reforms. Many of them have been delivered through the UC system and directly reduced people's UC payment.

This section has set out the wider context in which UC was developed and implemented. The next section will take a step back and outline the origins of the principles within UC. This further contextualises the extension of welfare conditionality.

3.3 The evolution of conditionality and activation in welfare policies

3.3.1 From creeping to ubiquitous welfare conditionality

The aftermath of the second world war brought with it a rapid growth of welfare state provisions in most western countries which lasted until the mid-1970s (Hamnett, 2011). Economic and political changes in the US and Europe thereafter caused many countries to abandon universal social security systems in favour of greater means testing. This led to the introduction of ALMPs and a growth in policies stressing citizen's individual responsibilities and mandating behavioral change (van Oorschot, 2000, 2006; Dwyer, 2004; Ingold and Etherington, 2013; Whitworth and Griggs, 2013; Dwyer and Wright, 2014, 2020).

In 1997, the New Labour Government introduced a raft of welfare policy initiatives for a widening group of benefit claimants. They also introduced institutional reforms through the creation of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) in 2001 which put social security and employment policy under one roof. Jobcentre Plus likewise merged the old benefit agencies with Jobcentres and created one delivery agency. These institutional and policy reforms shifted the focus from 'social security' to 'welfare to work' (Cole, 2007; Wright, 2023). Over the past twenty-five years, successive UK Governments have adopted this focus and linked receipt of welfare benefits with the responsibility of seeking paid work (Dwyer, 2004, Wright and Dwyer, 2020). This shift in policy focus is often described as 'workfare' a term encompassing an overall shift to greater activation and mandatory 'work-like' activities and a shift from universal eligibility to means testing of support. (Peck 2001; Finn, 2005; Bennett, 2012; Hamnett 2014).

UC extends many of the principles introduced by the New Labour Government more than two decades ago. Like their New Deal policies, UC is rooted in benefit conditionality that includes the use of sanctions, or reduction in benefit payments, if the policy requirements are not fulfilled. They have long been part of UK welfare policies and have gradually been extended to more groups and for longer durations. (House of Commons, 1996; Etherington and Daguerre; 2015; Adler, 2018; Bambra, 2019). Those in favour argue that it increases labour market attachments and move people off benefits [and into work] quickly (Couling, 2013). However, this logic does not fit well with the extension to those already in work. There is little evidence of their effectiveness (Watts et al. 2014; Pattaro et al., 2022) and benefit sanctions have been criticised for pushing people further into insecure and low paid work (Thomas, 2022).

This section has briefly outlined how UC is an extension of previous 'work first' policies. The next section will outline the background for simplifying the benefits system and demonstrate how that aim has historical roots in previous policy landscapes. Lastly specific UC policy structures are explained in detail.

3.3.2 From fragmented to single working age benefit system

The principle of simplifying the benefit system has been a long-standing ambition for governments for decades (Bennett, 2012; Spicker, 2012; Sainsbury, 2014). It was New Labour that commissioned the 'Freud Report' *Reducing dependency, increasing opportunity* (DWP, 2007) which laid the modern foundations for a single working age benefit system (Grover, 2007). This idea was adopted by the conservative politician Iain Duncan Smith and his think tank the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ). Their report *Breakthrough Britain: Dynamic Benefits Towards welfare that works* (CSJ, 2009) provided the foundation for combining out of work benefits with in-work benefits, such as working tax-credits. This created a structure that could produce the twin aims of a single system that simultaneously brought the desired behaviour change thought necessary to fix a 'Broken Britain' (CSJ, 2009). The 2009 CSJ report became a blueprint for what has since become UC. Furthermore, in 2010 David Freud became Minister for Welfare Reform serving under Iain Duncan Smith, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Hence, the two major architects of a single welfare system and a moral and behavioural turn in the welfare rhetoric, became the two most influential welfare politicians in the country.

Marrying up these two positions has not been without tensions which some argue have influenced design principles as well caused implementation issues for UC (Millar and Bennett, 2017; Griffiths et al. 2020, 2022). The aim of the single benefit system was to create a structure that would tackle a “culture of inactivity” (Sainsbury, 2014, p.38). This vision did not originally extend to creating a *simpler* system. However, simplicity has since been adopted as a cornerstone of the UC.

The next section will look in detail at specific policy elements of UC. This explains the institutional framework and lays the foundations for the empirical chapters and discusses how people’s capabilities are both enable and constrain by this new welfare policy.

3.3.3 Universal Credit policy goals

Chapter two described how the CA advocates for multi-dimensional policy goals and policy measures and how the UC in-work progression policy contains neither. UC is aimed at “transforming the way in which claimants interact with, and perceive, the benefits system, both in terms of in-work and out-of-work benefits” DWP (2017a, p.17). The first overarching aim is to simplify welfare delivery by introducing a new IT system and thereby making UC ‘digital by default’ (DWP, 2010b). This may be simpler to administer for the government but has been found to be complex to navigate for those claiming UC (Summers and Young, 2020; Griffiths et al., 2020).

The second aim of UC is to ‘mimic work’ (Bennett, 2012; Millar and Bennett, 2017). By making claiming benefits more ‘like work’ the Government argue they will reduce poverty, increase people’s independence and personal responsibility, and reduce fraud (DWP, 2010b). Part of the aim of making it like work is paying UC in one monthly lump sum to one bank account (in the case of joint claims). Critics however argue that this increases the risk of financial abuse of women and does not reflect how many low-income families live and manage money (Bennett and Sung, 2014; Millar and Bennett, 2017; Howard and Bennett, 2020). Monthly payments together with the monthly work allowance and the financial taper have all been identified as policy risks and found to be ill understood and less important than financial stability and security (Rotik and Perry, 2011; DWP 2017a, 2017b).

A third aim of UC is to make people 'better off in work' by 'making work pay' (DWP 2010a, 2010b, Bennett, 2012, Tarr and Finn, 2012). The policy is aimed at encouraging more people to do 'mini jobs', such as several shorter hour jobs at any one time. The rationale behind this is to move away from 'cliff edges' in the old benefit system when someone's hours of work could abruptly end a benefit claim (Bennett and Sung, 2014). In response, UC claims to reward work from the very first hour onwards which is meant to smooth the transition between being in and out of work. In theory, and analysed in isolation, groups losing out in the old benefit system were forecast to benefit from the smoother taper (Brewer et al, 2012). However, when looked at cumulatively and taking into account a wider set of assumptions, concerns have been raised that the benefits are marginal at best and for some groups of people the work incentives are weaker than in the old benefit system (Tarr and Finn, 2012; Brewer et.al, 2012; Spicker 2012, Bennett; 2012). One example is second earners in a household, who are mostly women, being faced with weaker incentives upon entering work than in the old system (Bennett, 2012; Tarr and Finn 2012; Brewer, Finch and Tomlinson, 2017; WBG, 2017; Griffiths et al. 2020). The rest of this thesis highlights how marginal increases in earnings are not converted into progression or better quality lives. Other factors that enable families to work, for example accessibility and cost of childcare, transport, low pay and insecure work persists and increases. Therefore, the assumed improved financial gain of working more while claiming UC often does not materialise for many people (DWP 2011, 2017a, 2017b; Browne et.al. 2016; Brewer, Finch and Tomlinson, 2017; Griffiths, 2017; Andersen, 2019; Griffiths et.al 2020, Wright, 2023).

The next section looks at a key element for creating capabilities through 'working more' namely the UC Claimant Commitment (CC).

3.3.4 Universal Credit Claimant Commitment

Part of making UC 'like work' is to create a 'contract' between the state and the individual. This CC needs to be agreed to in order to receive cash benefits through the UC system. It sets out people's responsibilities, such as the expected hours of work, the frequency of meetings with a work coach, and how and when to report any changes in circumstances. The latter can be anything from finding or losing a job to having another child or moving house.

The CC is intended to be an individually tailored set of requirements that are agreed by each person and their work coach. Its predecessor was the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) but compared to this the CC is meant to allow flexibility and to define and tailor specific goals for each individual. People living with a partner will have a joint claim where each individual must accept separate CCs. These two 'contracts' are then joined administratively and one payment, smaller than double the single rate, will be paid. This joint allowance will be affected by any change in the other partner's work status or circumstances (SSAC 2019, DWP, 2021). The single commitment, but joint repercussions and eligibility, has been experienced as 'out of touch' with modern ways of life and experienced as unfair when for example one partner has had their own history of work and paid national insurance contributions, but is ineligible for UC due to their partner's earnings or savings (Griffiths et.al 2020, Summers et.al 2021). If an individual fails to meet their agreed requirements without good reason, they may face a financial sanction, where their UC payment may be reduced for a certain period (Tarr and Finn, 2012; SSAC 2019; DWP, 2021). For couples, this could mean that if one partner does not meet the requirements in their individual CC it will affect the joint payment despite the other partner having fulfilled their 'contract' (Griffiths, 2020, 2022).

The conditionality requirements set out in the CC depend on an individual's circumstances, such as whether they have caring responsibilities or a disability, and on their household earnings. For families with children the CC requirements are a particularly dynamic element of UC because the age of the youngest child determines the requirements and as such will change as the child grows older or other children are added to the household.

The next section describes the different conditionality groups and how they relate to the labour market regimes which determine the requirements people must meet in order to receive UC.

3.3.5 Universal Credit conditionality requirements

UC claimants are expected to comply with several requirements in order to receive financial support in the form of the UC allowance. A claimant's circumstances will place them into a conditionality group and an associated labour market regime which define the type and level of activities claimants must do. Failure to meet these expectations may lead to a financial penalty in the form of a benefit sanction (DWP 2023e). The

type of conditionality placed on a claimant depends on circumstances such as individual health, caring responsibilities and the household's overall earnings. Having earnings above the Conditionality Earnings Threshold (CET) means there will be no conditionality applied while earnings below an Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET) means requirements to earn more (DWP, 2022c). For parents with dependent children, the age of their youngest child determines in which conditionality group they are placed (see Table 1 and 2 for detailed breakdowns of the UC conditionality groups and labour market regimes).

Despite UC being designed around earnings it is nonetheless understood and implemented in terms of required hours of work or work search as described in chapters five and six. The labour market regimes determine the level of engagement and define earnings by hours of work at the national minimum wage (NMW). Full conditionality is set at earning the equivalent of 35 hours NMW per week. Single parents and the 'lead carer' in couples have this requirement reduced to the equivalent of 25 hours per week when children are of primary school age. A second requirement is travelling time to and from work which is limited to 60 minutes each way on public transport for single parents or lead carers, and 90 minutes for those with full conditionality. A third element of the CC is setting out the frequency of meetings between people claiming UC and their work coach. This can be weekly for those in the intensive work search labour market regime, and less frequently for other regimes. Failure to meet any of these expectations risks having benefits reduced through sanctions (SSAC, 2019, DWP, 2023f).

The Government has recently made changes to the conditionality regimes by increasing the AET. The AET demarcates the intensive work search labour market regime from the light touch labour market regime and this change is expected to affect 144,000 people who will be faced with full conditionality and potential sanctions (DWP, 2022). Young people, women and parents are shown to be impacted the most (DWP, 2022).

Table 1. Conditionality and labour market regimes with regards to earnings (adapted from DWP, 2023a and 2023f)[1]

Conditionality group	Labour Market Regime	Individual Characteristics	Engagement with frontline workers
All Work Related Requirements	Light Touch	In work with individual or household earnings above the AET, but not above the relevant individual or household CET	From Jan 2023 expected to meet with a WC.
	Intensive Work Search	Claimants not working or working but earning below the AET.	Expected to take intensive action to look for work or more work. Meet regularly with WC (weekly or fortnightly).
Work Focused Interview (WFI)	Work Focused Interview	Having a child aged 3-4	Meet with WC and work 16 hrs per week
		Having a child aged 5-12	Meet with WC and work 25 hrs per week
Work Preparation	Work Preparation	Having limited capability to work because of health or having young children (aged 1-2)	Meet with WC and prepare CV
No Work Related Requirements	Working Enough	Earning above the individual or household CET	No designated WC. Only contact is with case manager.
	No Work Related Requirement	Having limited capability to work because of health, having a very young child (aged 0-1) or being in full-time education.	No meetings with WC. Contact case manager with issues related to payment or circumstances

[1] Correct at the time of writing. Changes to UC conditionality and earnings threshold available on Gov.uk

The CC is intended as a dynamic agreement and be tailored to people's individual circumstances as and when they may change (DWP, 2023a). This means people's requirements may change regularly, even at the end of each assessment period (month), when individual and household earnings are calculated by the automatic system (Griffiths, 2020). Because both earnings and the age of the youngest child determine parents' conditionality they will move in and out of different groups as their children grow older or new children are born. This dynamic element of UC has been found to be confusing and not well understood by neither claimants nor work coaches (Rotik and Perry, 2011; SSAC, 2019). Although work coaches may try to develop personalised CCs this effort is often hampered by caseloads that are growing in both size and diversity (SSAC, 2019).

Table 2. UC requirements based on the age of the youngest child (adapted from DWP, 2023a)

Age of youngest child	**UC requirements (at time of fieldwork and time of writing)**
Under 1	Claimants do not need to look for work
Aged 1	Claimants do not need to look for work but are required to meet with a work coach and discuss plans for working in the future.
Aged 2	Claimants do not need to look for work but are required to attend regular appointments with work coaches and do work preparation activities (for example, writing your CV).
Aged 3 or 4	Work 16 hours a week (or spend 16 hours a week looking for work).
Aged between 5 and 12	Work 25 hours a week (or spend 25 hours a week looking for work).
Aged 13 or over	Work 35 hours a week (or spend 35 hours a week looking for work).

The next section looks specifically at the UC in-work progression policy requirements in relation to the UC conditionality requirements.

3.3.6 Extension of conditionality to those already in work

The introduction of conditionality to people with low earnings means that requirements previously imposed on unemployed people have in UC been extended to low paid workers. At the time of writing 40 per cent of those claiming UC are doing some form of paid work (DWP, 2022). Some of these will be 'earning enough' (according to UC policy) but many are likely to fall into the All Work Related Requirements conditionality group, either in the Intensive Work Search or the Light Touch labour market regimes. Alternatively, they will move between conditionality regimes as jobs start, end and other jobs are added to the mix.

As the labour market regimes determine the level of engagement with work coaches this can be a highly unpredictable situation for some claimants (Griffiths et al., 2022). The requirement is that "claimants who can reasonably be expected to work have a responsibility to seek opportunities for earnings progression" (DWP, 2016, p.4) and will have to take mandatory action in order to increase their earnings through taking on extra work or gaining higher wages. This extends conditionality requirements to a much larger group of people than previously. Some, for example people receiving tax-credits only, may not have had any previous contact with Jobcentre Plus, nor any knowledge or experience of conditionality and sanctions. The prospect of facing financial penalties for not finding additional work has been found to lack resonance with in-work benefit recipients who believe they are 'doing the right thing' already (Wright and Dwyer, 2020; Wright, 2023). Wiggan (2012) criticises the policy rationale for ignoring established issues such as structural inequality, labour market productivity and the role of unpaid work. Indeed, several studies outline how this policy will be particularly problematic for single and partnered mothers whose chances of finding (more) work are slim in a labour market characterised by a rise in low paid jobs, insecure contracts and increased part-time working with a significant shortfall of family-friendly jobs and a lack of affordable childcare provision (Shildrick et al. 2012; Etherington and Daguerre, 2015; Bennett, 2018; Beatty, Bennett and Hawkins, 2020). A more likely outcome is to work multiple jobs as described by Smith and McBride (2021).

The policy rationale furthermore ignores intergenerational and lifecourse aspects. The new requirements have profound implications for middle aged and older women who

often have a double burden of caring for elderly relatives as well as grandchildren. Their CC is likely to place them in the All Work Related Requirement conditionality regime and expect 35 hours of work or work search activity (Fitzpatrick and Chapman, 2021; Wright, 2023). The everyday impact of the changes in conditionality for participants in this research is discussed in chapter seven.

Whilst the impacts of unequal welfare reforms on individuals as well as places has been documented in several studies (Beatty and Fothergill, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020) less attention has been paid to how austerity has influenced the process of designing and delivering welfare policies. The next section briefly introduces this before a more detailed discussion follows in chapter five.

3.4 Policymaking in times of austerity

'The austerity decade' was experienced by many parts of society and in many countries across the western world but the UK implemented austerity cuts that went further, and deeper than most other countries (Hall et al. 2020). Here benefit claimants were particularly hard hit (see section 3.2) together with workers in local and central government roles (Hastings and Gannon, 2021). The civil service shrank by nearly a fifth, reaching 384,260 staff members at its lowest point in June 2016 (Sasse and Norris, 2019). This was the smallest since 1945, almost reaching the 380,000 set out by the 2012 Civil Service Reform Plan (Cabinet Office, 2012). DWP was one of the departments losing most: 39,000 jobs or 32% of the total left between March 2010 and March 2015 (Timmins, 2016). The greatest losses took place on the frontline where almost 100 Jobcentres closed down (HoC Library, 2017; Finn, 2018).

The 2012 Civil Service Plan also demanded improvements in management and leadership skills, enhanced focus on digital service delivery, and importantly 'more rigorous performance management' (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 22). This resulted in the introduction of a management performance system with targets for the proportion of staff being placed in categories of top to bottom performers. The top group would gain one-off financial bonuses and be more likely to advance into better paid jobs whilst the bottom would be 'told to improve' and risked redundancy. This added to a Jobcentre culture already driven by labour market and performance targets where pressures were put on individual frontline advisers by their local management team (Couling, 2013; Webster, 2017, 2019).

Thus began a policymaking and policy implementation context of reduced staff numbers, increased workloads and a harsher staff performance system. Chapter two discussed how capabilities through work influence the capability to work (Bueno, 2021). The work of policymakers charged with developing and implementing UC took place within this period, which has been described as “the gory story of implementation” (Timmins, 2016, p.38). Furthermore, from the ashes of this new, slimmed down department rose a culture of defensiveness and mistrust of those raising concerns about the UC programme or elements of it (Timmins, 2016). How this austere policymaking context influences the values, ideas and agency of those designing and implementing UC is the focus of chapters five and six.

So far, this chapter has placed the research questions within the evolutionary context of welfare conditionality and austerity. It has also explained the UC policy rationale and described specific policy elements and how they relate to the expansion of conditionality requirements. The last section of this chapter places the research questions within the context of one particular geographic place, thereby delving deeper into spatial inequalities of austerity.

3.5 Spatial Context

3.5.1 Spatial austerity

Just as austerity has not been experienced by individuals in the same way, nor have towns and cities across the country been affected equally. As well as introducing welfare cuts described in section 3.2, austerity policies significantly reduced central government funding grants for local governments, at the same time as the Government restricted local authorities’ ability to raise council tax to fill the gap (House of Commons, 2019). By 2015 local authorities had experienced cuts by nearly a quarter manifested through reductions in non-statutory services such as planning and development, housing services, roads and cultural and leisure services, which has reduced by more than 40% (Innes and Tetlow, 2015). Uneven economic development has had different geographical impacts, and old industrial areas of Britain, hardest hit by the far-reaching economic restructuring which started in the 1980s, have continued to lag behind (Beatty and Fothergill, 2020a). These towns and cities are the same

places that have higher concentration of benefit claimants among its population, and lower levels of good health (Marmot et al. 2021).

Cities have been harder hit than other types of local authorities, and cities in the north have been harder hit than cities in the south (Centre for Cities, 2019). On average, northern cities saw a cut of 20 per cent to their spending compared to 9 per cent for cities in the East, South East and South West (excluding London) (Centre for Cities, 2019). Most of the fieldwork with UC claimants took place in two neighbourhoods of Oldham in Greater Manchester. Since 2010, Oldham council has lost grants amounting to £337 per person (Centre for Cities, 2019) and the council have had to make savings of £208 million from their budgets (Oldham Chronicle, 26 October 2018). Chapter seven provides more detail about the fieldwork location.

Most of the low-income UC claimants taking part in this research lived in Oldham in the North West of England. Oldham is an old industrial town with about 240,000 people situated northeast of Manchester and part of the ten local authorities that make up the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). In the late 1800s it was a prosperous town dominated by employment in the textile industry. Today it suffers from deindustrialisation and is considered to have been 'left out' of the general growth taking place in in the Greater Manchester region over the past decades (Lupton et.al 2019; Hawksbee, 2023). Most areas of Oldham are more deprived than average in England and a significant number of wards are among the most deprived nationally (Koch et al. 2021). Further details of the fieldwork location and the everyday experiences of austerity, UC and wider welfare reforms will be the focus of chapter seven.

3.6 Conclusions

This chapter has outlined the evolution of welfare conditionality in the UK over the past two decades. This makes up the foundations that the UC assumptions and specific policy elements are rooted in. It has also placed the policy within a spatial context of economic austerity and place-based context of poverty and deprivation. In doing so, this chapter has justified undertaking a holistic look at UC from the perspectives of policymakers and families experiencing it in their everyday lives.

The UC policy continues many established practices of ALMPs. However, among its important departures is the introduction of conditionality to low-income workers who are deemed to not work enough (Wright and Dwyer, 2020). This new policy requirement was introduced throughout an austerity decade which shifted welfare spending from working age to older people, reduced both eligibility and sufficiency of welfare payments and severely cut both central and local government spending. In addition, the period saw an increase in precarious and low-paid work making it even harder to earn more. The remainder of this thesis will discuss how the combination of these factors have resulted in a policy disconnected from everyday lives where most people are simply trying to 'do the right thing' and live the best lives they can.

Chapter four explains the methodological approach behind this thesis. It builds on the policy and theoretical contexts outlined in this chapter and chapter two and explains how the choice of methodology corresponds to the aims of the research questions.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to answer the research questions set out in chapter one and in section 4.2 below.

Firstly, the rationale for choosing to conduct qualitative research is discussed. This is followed by a description and definition of the data collection and data analysis, before an assessment of the overall credibility and transferability of the research is made.

4.2 Research approach: Qualitative research situated in time and space

A qualitative research methodology is conducive to investigating in-depth parents' decision-making around who works, where and how much they choose to work. This methodology is also helpful in analysing the process of policymaking and policy delivery from the viewpoint of policy actors. Its strength is to understand context, diversity, nuance, and processes and dynamics of change (Mason, 2002). Another strength is to uncover the complexity and relationship between individual agency and structures (Corden and Millar, 2007).

The epistemological approach used in this thesis falls within the interpretivist research tradition. A starting point for interpretivist philosophy is to recognise differences and understand subjective views and meanings that individuals attach to the world in which they live. It is often contrasted with positivist traditions which use statistical methods to measure and explain behaviour in order to find causal explanations (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative research on the other hand approaches causality in terms of explaining the fluidity of causal processes. This is of interest when looking at which policies, or elements of policies, are more effective at bringing about the desired change or effect (Neale, 2021).

This research lends itself to an interpretivist inductive approach as it aims to better understand the values, norms and ideals that guide the behaviour and decision making of policymakers, frontline workers and families. Inductive research builds up an

understanding from the data as it is collected by identifying patterns and themes and exploring the relationships between them. As such it is a 'bottom up' approach to creating knowledge and theory. It contrasts with a deductive research approach which starts from a pre-conceived idea, a theory or a hypothesis which is then tested for generalisable data validity, more often through quantitative methods but not solely so.

The approach adopted in a research project is closely linked to the research questions. The strength of an inductive approach is that it is better suited to uncover unknown meaning or understanding and clarify the nature of processes (Bryman, 2016; Azungha, 2018).

The research questions for this project are:

1. How do policymakers understand the concept of progression? In what ways does that align with the view of in-work progression in the UC policy? How do they think extending welfare conditionality to those already in work will lead to progression for low-income parents?

2. How is the UC in-work progression policy delivered by frontline workers? In what ways does that change and shape the policy?

3. How do families claiming UC experience in-work progression? What strategies do they currently use to balance work, care and other activities? How are these strategies shaped by temporal-spatial relationships and the local economic, social and geographic context?

4. What does 'good work' and good quality of life look like for both policymakers and people claiming UC? What values do they share and what opportunities and freedoms do they have to pursue progression in ways that align with their values?

This research also uses elements of a case study approach. Case studies focus on understanding the dynamics of the present within single settings (Eisenhardt, 2002, p.8) and is concerned with 'obtaining a rounded picture of a situation or event from the

perspectives of all the persons involved' (Hakim, 1987, p. 9). It is considered a useful approach when the research focus is a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2014). In this thesis the lived experience of UC and related welfare policies is illustrated using case studies. The original design had aimed for these case studies to be built on a qualitative longitudinal research methodology. However, for reasons explained below (4.4.3) a longitudinal follow-up was only possible for two families. Despite this, individual case studies are used to describe everyday experiences at the time of the fieldwork interview whilst also describing events leading up to that point in time. In the two cases where follow-up interviews were possible this helped add up to date information which was useful because the UC policy was rapidly changing during the period of fieldwork. This fluid and flexible approach illustrates how qualitative longitudinal research can "support and facilitate the production of dynamic, real-world evidence for policy and professional practice" (Neale, 2021, p.653).

4.3 Researcher positionality: insider and outsider

I had over 15 years' experience of government social research prior to starting the PhD. However, it is important to note that this research is independent of the Government and funded through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The independence was strengthened by having a career break during the first two years of this project during which time I was not involved with DWP. This background may have made the policymakers see me as 'one of them' and trust me more than other researchers. However, this trust was not universal, and a considerable number of policymakers declined to take part.

Doing research on an organisation where you are already employed has been criticised by some as potentially risking academic rigour and objectivity because the researcher may have a personal stake in the research (Alvesson, 2003). However, insider research is also believed to have a valuable role to play in all major research traditions. Brannick and Coughlan (2007) define it as research undertaken by "complete members of organizational systems and communities in and on their own organization" (p 59). This differs from self-ethnography which is a more immersive investigation of a natural setting for the researcher (see Alvesson, 2003, for detailed discussion of self-ethnography). Insider research on the other hand takes a more

systematic and planned approach where insider knowledge and networks help aid the research but may not be the specific setting for, nor the particular subject under, investigation.

To reduce bias in such situations the researcher must adopt a reflexive position in order to acknowledge and attempt to understand the influence that one's own position may have on the research - whether that is intentional or unintentional (Brannick and Coughlan, 2007; Jootun, 2009). Reflexivity means that researchers are explicit, open and honest about their own positionality, for example through outlining how their own personal history, prior experiences, judgements, thoughts and feelings may influence the research overall, the type of questions asked and how questions were asked. This will affect the nature and the quality of the data that is collected, and how it is being analysed. Being reflexive throughout the research process and open about own positionality clarifies the results and helps others understand the conclusions better (ONS, 2022).

The insider status for the policymaker research is contrasted with the research involving in-depth interviews with UC claimants. For that part of the research, I was arguably more of an outsider in that I have an unfamiliar name, speak English with a foreign accent and do not live in the same geographical location. Hall (2020a) outlines how accents as well as other personal characteristics such as name, class and gender can provide both opportunities and obstacles in the research process. My impression was that exactly because I was an outsider I avoided being judged according to "geographic and social placings" (Hall, 2020b, p. 45). Furthermore, because I have experienced a different cultural upbringing from all the research participants neither group of participants could easily place me into one social class or another.

I was open about the dual role of being a PhD student and having a career break from DWP. I was concerned this duality could cause upset or anger depending on people's experiences of the benefit system. To my surprise I felt people saw this as an opportunity for their views to be heard more clearly and reach 'the right people'. As such it aided a more open and honest conversation. Hence, I was "welcomed as a stranger" as discussed by Hall (2020a, pp. 48-49). These insider-outsider roles therefore overlapped. Furthermore, as I was exposed to everyday stories I came to

reflect on organisational 'policy truths' that helped uncover the policy mismatch between assumed and lived reality that runs through the whole of this thesis.

4.4 Data collection

4.4.1 Selecting the samples and choosing fieldwork locations

Data for this research were collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews with fifteen policymakers as well as fifteen individuals who at the time of interview were receiving UC payments and had dependent children living with them. In addition, I conducted secondary data analysis of twenty qualitative interviews with frontline Jobcentre Plus workers. These frontline interviews were conducted by social researchers within DWP for the purpose of operational insights. I was part of the team that conducted this research and undertook a third of these interviews myself. To help inform this PhD I was given access to anonymised detailed interview notes with the consent of the participants. Full transcripts were not available. A table of the sample is attached at Annex 1.

The question of 'how many qualitative interviews is enough?' is discussed by Baker and Edwards (2012) who conclude that good qualitative research is concerned about talking *with* people rather than *at* them. Therefore, the quality of the interview, the extent to which it provides detailed, specific, in-depth and engaging information - is more important than how many interviews are achieved. The aim in this thesis is therefore not to generalise across the population but to gain thematic commonality and detailed insights. I chose to interview policymakers because there is little available literature on their experience of developing and implementing UC. I also chose to focus on families with dependent children because literature at the time suggested they would be particularly affected by changes introduced by the new welfare policies introduced from 2010 onwards (Rotik and Perry, 2011; Bennett; 2012; Bennett and Sung, 2014; Hartfree, 2014). Including frontline interviews allowed me to gain insights into the values and ideas influencing policy delivery which is compared to the policy design role of the policymakers that I interviewed. Inclusion of both primary and

secondary data expanded the view of how capabilities are enabled and constrained throughout the whole policy process.

Qualitative data are always contextual. The meaning that is inferred is strongly connected to the geographical, social, political and economic context in which it was collected. Parts of this study are closely connected to a particular location, namely two areas of Oldham in the North West of England. This was done in order to unpick abstract policy objectives and assumptions by situating the policy in an everyday relational reality. The notion of 'place' is a debated concept in Human Geography (see for example Holloway and Hubbard, 2001; Massey, 2005) and in this thesis the location of the study represents space in both a physical and abstract geographical sense. Physically the fieldwork area is located on the eastern edge of Greater Manchester. To the north and east it is surrounded by the Pennine hills and to the west the eight-lane M60 motorway dominates the landscape. To the south it borders a nature reserve of rivers and deep ravines. The location also represents space in its more abstract form as a place that people have made meaningful, to which they are connected and attached to in different ways, and that influences their views of the world (Creswell, 2004). To help situate and contextualise the research I followed the recommended practice set out by Shaw (2005) and spent much time walking around neighbourhoods in both areas to make myself familiar with local services, employment opportunities, housing and green spaces. I also used various public transport routes to get around and to get from the prime research locality to the centre of Oldham, to the centre of Manchester, and to the centre of Ashton-Under-Lyne. These are all key commuter destinations for people in these locations (Hughes and Lupton, 2018). I posted flyers about the research in shops, libraries and health centres but found the most effective recruitment method was to go door to door and post flyers directly through letterboxes. Another effective method was to hand out flyers to parents and carers at the end of the school day as they made their way home.

In addition, I piloted the research instruments with the help of a gatekeeper organisation that connected me with two single parents living in the south of England. These interviews have been included because their experiences shared many thematic similarities to those in Oldham adding strengths to aspects of policy mismatch. These pilot interviews were conducted over the phone. In order to gain a sense of

place, I used Google Maps and satellite views as an additional tool allowing me to relate the conversation to a spatial context.

4.4.2 Recruiting and interviewing policymakers

Speaking to policymakers was an opportunity to create detailed and personal accounts of how ideas and agency shape the process of formulating a policy rationale and translating it into a deliverable policy. This thesis is based on a sample of civil servants and policy experts from think tanks and organisations that have been vocal about changes to the welfare system. I also spoke to policy advisers from local and regional organisations who were working closely with local government and Jobcentre Plus representatives. This sample acknowledges how the process of policymaking happens both within and outside of government, often aided by the movement of people between civil service roles and external expert roles, and back again, as outlined in chapter five.

In section 4.3 I outlined my own positionality as a government social researcher. This position gave me access to civil servants in a way others may struggle to do. On a practical level finding people's contact details was easier, but more important was the trust that comes from being an insider as described above (4.3). The non-government policymakers were identified and selected by reviewing external literature about UC and scanning parliamentary, organisational and traditional media sources. I did not use social media, such as X (formerly Twitter), for this purpose. Furthermore, those that had previous government experience were known to me from my own work in DWP.

Policymakers were approached initially by email. This included an information sheet which outlined the research aims, what their participation entailed and data confidentiality. A date and time for the interview was arranged upon a positive reply and the respondents were given the choice of meeting face to face or by telephone. About a quarter agreed to meet face to face whilst the rest preferred a telephone interview. The face-to-face interviews lasted for an hour or more whilst the telephone interview lasted 50 mins to an hour with one interview at 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded upon consent from the participants. Section 4.6 provide further details of data handling and management.

4.4.3 Recruiting and interviewing low-income families

UC families were recruited in stages, starting with some unsuccessful attempts during Spring 2017 before the first successful interview in Oldham was achieved early Autumn 2017. The most difficult part was to identify families with dependent children who claimed UC without having access to DWP data. Towns in Greater Manchester were among the first in the country to accept UC claimants, including families with children. In the earlier days of UC roll-out claimants with children tended to migrate on to the new benefit through a change of circumstance such as moving house. Today, almost ten years later, families on tax-credits who have experienced no changes of circumstances are told by DWP to migrate on to UC (see chapter three for the policy background). Furthermore, from a practical point of view Oldham's proximity to Sheffield where I live (which at the time had not yet introduced UC) suggested it would be a suitable location. Despite this, the recruitment process ended up being more time consuming than anticipated and lasted until summer 2018.

The original research design relied on sampling with the help of local gatekeeper organisations. Despite visiting several local welfare and community organisations and providing them with information sheets there was little response via this route. Initially I also tried handing out leaflets outside several Jobcentres in Greater Manchester (with the permission of the local Jobcentre staff) but the numbers of people visiting these Jobcentres in person were too low to result in any willingness to take part.

The most fruitful recruitment strategy originated from one of the local policymaker interviews where I was introduced to two areas of Oldham where many families claimed UC. There is no Jobcentre office in any of these neighbourhoods and displaying posters in the local health centres and libraries turned out to be unsuccessful. Furthermore, there were few local organisations in these areas. As described in section 4.4.1 posting flyers though letterboxes and handing them out to parents as they were picking up their children from school led to the majority of the UC claimant sample.

The achieved sample consisted of five couple families and ten single-parent families (Annex 1). The original intention was to interview both adults in couple families, but this was discarded because participants were unwilling to include their partners. This was mainly due to practical reasons. Some partners were working shifts that made

interviewing them difficult. Others had adopted a 'living together apart' relationship where fathers were emotionally present in family life but did not live with the mother and children permanently. These fathers were however not part of the main economic and emotional decision-making mirroring recent research by Griffiths et al. (2020, 2022). This also highlights how navigating the welfare landscape and managing the family finances, providing care, filling the shortfalls of local austerity cuts, and providing emotional support "remains a largely gendered responsibility with distinctly personal and political consequences" (Hall, 2020b, p.250). Two participants (one male and one female) were separated from their partner and lived apart from their children. Their benefit status was as a non-resident parent. They were therefore subject to the same benefit rules as single jobseekers despite having a considerable care role. This caused problems with UC which helped uncover some of the policy mismatches (see chapter seven for further discussion). For this reason, they have been included in the research.

Interviews lasted up to one and a half hours in length. The majority took place in participant's homes allowing them to be adapted to household situations. This allowed for interruptions by children who were often present at the time of the interview, which added both context and nuance to the conversations. Four interviews in Oldham had to take place over the phone due to wintery weather closing roads and cancelling trains. Some interviews were rescheduled for this reason, but some participants preferred to go ahead at the scheduled time given other commitments. Because I had spent many days in the research location already, I was still able to relate to and talk about place-specific issues.

As discussed in section 4.2 longitudinal qualitative research has the potential to better understand processes of change over time and allows the researcher to develop improved comprehension of how participants respond to and interpret changes in their lives (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003). Because I was particularly interested in exploring how families had experienced and responded to changes in benefit requirements a longitudinal research element seemed particularly relevant. The original research design had anticipated that families would be revisited about nine months to a year after the first interview. However, this was only achieved for two of the interviews due to my own ill health which demanded a year's pause in the research from early Autumn 2018. This pause was then followed by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns which stopped any plans for revisiting participants.

I had originally envisaged adopting a 'walking and talking' research method. Anderson (2004) describes this as a method that can be used in conjunction with qualitative semi-structured interviews and that "conversations held whilst walking through a place have the potential to generate a collage of collaborative knowledge" (p.254). I had especially wanted this method to add layers to the relationship between work and care decisions, and together with participants experience the local neighbourhood in relation to children's schools and childcare, community or social service organisations, and family and social networks. Kusenbach (2003) suggest such 'go-along' interviews are particularly suited to researching spatial practices and social realms in order to understand how individuals comprehend and engage their physical and social environments in everyday life (p.456). However, extraneous factors, such as adverse weather, is not well covered in this literature. The 2017 winter was particularly cold, wet, windy and snowy in the North of England. Perhaps not surprisingly, no one wanted to walk around their neighbourhood in such conditions. Therefore, the only such interview took place in the late summer of 2018, just before I had to pause the primary research.

4.4.4 Secondary analysis of interviews with frontline staff

During the research, it became apparent that adding the views of frontline workers would add the context of the 'missing middle' of the policymaking process (Brodkin 2013, 2017). Case managers and work coaches are the main frontline workers involved in UC delivery. Case managers are responsible for payment issues and are based in back-office positions in UC service centres. Work coaches meet people face to face in Jobcentres and have the closest personal relationship with UC claimants. The views of these two groups would complement the data from the 'upstream' policymakers and from the lived experience of families. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic the opportunity to interview frontline Jobcentre Plus staff was limited. At this time, I had returned to work part-time as a social researcher in an analytical division in DWP. This gave me the opportunity to seek and gain access to anonymised transcripts of twenty DWP interviews with frontline workers. All the frontline workers gave explicit consent for the interview to be used in this PhD research. Most of the interviews were carried out by trained social researchers working across DWP policy areas, but a third was carried out by myself in more role as a government social researcher.

The interviews were conducted to inform ongoing operational monitoring in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the focus of these interviews was not specifically about UC in-work progression, they covered UC delivery at a particularly challenging time and provided important information about factors influencing frontline capabilities such as agency, discretion, time and approach to delivering centralised policy objectives. As such these frontline interviews complement and link the primary datasets (Tarrant and Hughes, 2018) and help glue together different experiences of the UC in-work progression policy through linked themes and contexts. Conducting qualitative secondary analysis of these frontline interviews helped translate issues and bring to the surface shared themes. For example, the context and theme of austerity feature in all three strands of data collection. For the frontline workers it manifested itself in their experiences of reduced frontline services, and everyday relations with their caseloads. Without this element the journey of shared values and different constraints across the whole policy process may not have surfaced. The concept of progression as a narrow earnings measure without enabling delivery tools similarly came to the surface through these secondary interviews.

Adding a strand of qualitative secondary analysis to this research furthermore extended my own understanding and aided the analyses and explanations of policy mismatches. My own organisational embeddedness in the context and collection of these secondary interviews helped inform the research. It also helped bring a critical reflection of my own positionality and how this shape the findings of the research (for a more detailed discussion of positionality see section 4.3).

The number of UC claimants have not reduced to pre-pandemic levels (DWP, 2023e) and these insights are therefore relevant to current demands of frontline workers in Jobcentre Plus.

4.5 Ethical considerations and safety precautions

4.5.1 Risks

Research ethics is an important consideration before, during and after fieldwork. Discussing sensitive topics both complicates and reinforces the need for ethical reflection, both in terms of research procedures, such as pre-fieldwork ethical agreement from the University (Ref no 008678) and in terms of 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). The latter includes, but is not limited to, risks that arise in the interview situation. This could be risk of disclosure and risks associated with re-visiting potentially distressing stories through transcription and analysis. Distressing issues and events did come up during the interview but in keeping with the main objectives of the research I simply listened to these stories and noted them in a wider holistic context of the lives of the participants, rather than question or seek further detail – thereby attempting to safeguard both them and me. None of the interviews necessitated need for further support although I had made a list of local and national support organisations for this purpose.

Physical risks to myself as a sole female researcher were also considered. Initially I aimed to conduct interviews in public places such as libraries. However, due to shortened library openings and lack of privacy when they were open (see chapter seven) this was not a suitable location. Furthermore, the lack of other public spaces or cafés in the area meant that most of the interviews were conducted in participants' home at their request. This made it easier in terms of looking after their children and may have added a level of safety by being in a familiar environment. I adopted a call in – call out approach with my supervisor as a safeguarding method. However, it should be said that I never felt unsafe in any of the interviews. On the contrary I felt very welcomed and accepted.

Risk of disclosure has been reduced through anonymising names, referring to large geographical locations and storing all the research data in password protected files on the university servers. Recordings were deleted from a handheld recording device

immediately after being uploaded to my university IT account. No data were ever stored on USBs or similar devices.

4.5.2 Interviews and consent

Qualitative research often, although not always, consists of conducting and interpreting interviews with one or more individual in order to produce and document insights into someone's experiences, knowledge and ideas (Silvermann, 2004; Brinkmann, 2013). It has been described as and 'inter-view' or an 'interaction of views' about any subject or topic (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). An interview is therefore a conversation, or a "scene of social interaction", more than simply a "tool for collection of data" (Alvesson, 2003: 169). Perhaps the most important aspect of any research interview is the ability of the researcher to connect with and gain the trust of the individual or group being interviewed. My main aim was therefore to create a safe and open environment in which a conversation could take place. The assertion by one of the UC participants that I had *"not been nosy or anything"*, despite having spoken to them for over an hour about detailed and intimate aspects of their life was perhaps the best feedback I could have received in this respect.

No participant should feel forced or compelled to take part in interviews. Neither should the interviewer feel unsafe. Interviewers should also have the right to some form of anonymity following the interview. To ensure this I had set up a pay-as-you go mobile phone number for the purpose of the research. This was used to arrange interviews. Phone interviews were done via a landline where the number was withheld. Before proceeding with questions and follow-up prompts, I outlined the background and structure of the interview, explained issues of confidentiality, read out the consent statement and received consent to take part and record the conversation. No participants opted out. For phone interviews a hard copy of the consent form was subsequently sent to participants for their records. The recorded verbal consent was transcribed and stored separately from the interview transcript.

UC participants were offered financial compensation for giving up their time. Several ethical considerations need to be considered when offering compensation (Head, 2009). A central one is the principle of justice and inclusivity, where participation in research should be accessible to everyone, regardless of socio-economic status.

Furthermore, it is important to respect participants' time as valuable and compensate for loss of time accordingly. The information sheet and the consent procedure must also ensure that participation is voluntary. Participants should not feel coerced or unduly influenced to participate. In addition, the financial amount should not be too large, so that participants would want to participate at all costs. Nor should it be too small as not to be a real compensation for their time. At the time of fieldwork, the national living wage was just under ten pounds and hour. Given that interviews were scheduled to take a minimum of one hour – and usually took longer - it seemed fair to compensate people for up to two hours of their time. Therefore, family participants were offered £20 as a thank you for giving up their time to participate and sharing their experiences and expertise. Policymakers were not offered a research incentive given they took part in an official capacity and would already be paid for their time as interviews took place during working hours.

The questions for all participants were open ended and covered participant characteristics and family situations, their paid and unpaid work responsibilities, the location, nature and flexibilities associated with their paid work, their aspirations for progressing and what support they would need for this to happen. For the policymakers the conversations also covered their reflections on the policymaking culture and how they used evidence when designing policy options.

4.6 Data Analysis

All primary research interviews were transcribed in full. This provided a verbatim account of the conversation which helped to fully respond to the research questions. This approach is consistent with most qualitative research. As far as possible the transcripts include words in the way they were spoken in order to give as accurate a voice as possible to the research participants (McLellan et al., 2003). Qualitative data is invariably “unstructured and unwieldy” (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002:309) consisting of a mixture of text, verbatim transcripts of conversations, and field notes. I chose to analyse the data thematically due to its on focus on both the content and meaning of interview data and its flexible approach to acknowledge themes that were both anticipated and that emerged as the analysis took shape. This fits with the epistemological and ontological approach of the thesis and allowed me to keep an open mind on a range of possible outcomes from the interviews.

Analysing qualitative data thematically can be done using a variety of technological aids such as through Nvivo or other specialised software packages. It can also be done manually through cutting and pasting, highlighting specific text segments, and ordering and re-ordering them according to themes. Few do the latter these days, but the principles are the same: to identify themes and quotes that form the basis of discussion and mining knowledge. In this research all interviews were recorded digitally (conditional on participant consent) and augmented with notetaking and fieldnotes. They were then transcribed on to word documents where segments were highlighted using different colours. These were then organised into themes and analysed using a Framework Approach (using excel software) which aided the process of systematically defining concepts, mapping the range of information, creating typologies, finding associations and seeking explanations (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002 p. 309). My own positionality aided deduction of meanings and contexts within the policymaker stories given my in-depth knowledge of policymaking processes. The contexts and meanings within the UC claimant interviews were collected through a combination of repeat interviews with two participants and several visits to the fieldwork areas as outlined in section 4.4.3. Not every field visit included an interview. Some were simply to 'get a feel' for the areas in which people live and spend most of their time. This allowed me to connect personal stories and views to the broader social and spatial contexts.

Within qualitative geographical research there is a focus on capturing contexts of qualitative interviews such as the setting in which the interview was conducted, or the spaces and times that the interview conversation relate to. Narrative approaches to qualitative data analysis lend themselves well to geographers whose research is aimed at capturing the dynamics of everyday life. This umbrella term includes a number of research approaches; from structured 'formal' investigations to more interpretive ones and is focussed on "interpreting and understanding layers of meaning in interview talk and the connections among them" (Wiles et al. 2005**,** p.90). It is a way of interpreting a conversation by paying attention to people's contexts and wider meanings within their stories. It is also a way to avoid the 'leaky bucket' of the qualitative interview where emotions and meanings are ignored in favour of discrete units of texts that are codified, counted and de-personalised (Sinha, 2021).

The data analysis approach in this research therefore includes elements of narrative analysis woven together with more traditional approaches. One example is presenting people's stories using a narrative case study approach when describing certain policy elements. In doing so people's names have been altered to ensure anonymity. However, alternative names were used rather than interview numbers or similar in order to make the text 'come alive' to a greater extent.

4.7 Conclusions

In this thesis qualitative research methods were used to investigate a disconnect between policy assumptions, policy implementation and everyday lived experiences of UC. This chapter has outlined how I went about doing this research and why I chose certain methodological paths over others. The chapter sets out the process through which this research was conducted and how this was influenced by a-priori theory and literature as well as by own assumptions, positionality, knowledge and experience. I have described how challenges and issues have been identified and overcome. These challenges relate to almost every aspect of the research process such as choosing fieldwork location and recruiting the sample, own positionality, ethical issues related to topic sensitivities and fieldwork risks, data analysis approach and how to take account of geographical context. I have also described how I have had to adapt the intended research method due to unforeseen circumstances.

A PhD project is limited in scope and reach compared to many research projects which may benefit from larger funding or have a team of experienced researchers attached to it. However, despite being small in scale the inclusion of participants from across the three phases of the policy process – design, delivery and use - adds a novel contribution to welfare policy research. The interviews with low-income families highlight issues with UC that align with larger scale projects (Griffiths et al. 2020, 2022; Wright and Dwyer, 2020; Summers et al. 2021, Wood, 2021). A further added value this research brings is to discuss these experiences in both a spatial local context as well as an abstract policy context.

5 Policymakers' understanding of in-work progression

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how policymakers involved in UC policy design and development understand the concept of progression and how this understanding is influenced by their own values and ideas related to balancing work with other activities that are valuable to them. Using the CA the chapter describes how these policy actors are enabled and constrained in bringing their beliefs, knowledge and ideas into the UC policymaking process. In subsequent chapters the same lens will be applied to frontline workers and people experiencing UC as claimants.

Based on qualitative interviews undertaken with fifteen policymakers, the chapter answers research question one set out in section 1.3. The empirical data are analysed in relation to theoretical concepts of the CA as described in chapter two. In terms of understanding what enhances and restricts policymakers' capabilities it is helpful to determine how values and ideas translate, or not, into actual policies. This chapter considers the agency of 'upstream' policymakers and discusses how they are enabled and constrained in their roles. These policymakers formulate policy objectives and determine how to measure success. The chapter describes their values, ideas, motivations and understandings of progression and to what extent they felt able to bring these into UC policy. Policymakers have been described by some as disconnected from the reality of people's lives due to a conceptual and spatial void in the policymaking process (Slater, 2022). Whether this is due to lack of knowledge, lack of evidence, or inability to convert that knowledge and evidence into policy measures are key issues in this chapter. This helps understand the mismatch between the policy rationale of UC in-work progression and evidence and knowledge about how people on low-income live and work, which was raised in chapter two.

Ultimately this chapter demonstrates that 'progression' can mean a number of things to policymakers, including 'non-economic' ones. However, when these meanings are translated into policy the concept becomes narrow, abstract and disconnected from everyday geographic lives. The final part of the chapter explores how policymakers envisaged a more holistic and multi-dimensional UC policy. The chapter concludes by considering how the CA might be used as a framework for policy design and policy

measures to enable more holistic and human centred policy goals and measures. This discussion will be followed by looking at how the policy is implemented on the frontline in chapter six and experienced by people claiming UC in chapter seven.

5.2 Freedom to design policies aligned with own values

5.2.1 Policymakers as active agents in the policy process

This research involved in-depth interviews with 15 individuals who at the time of the fieldwork were involved in bringing opinions, values and ideas into the process of designing, formulating, operationalising and measuring UC policy instruments and outcomes. Some were civil servants who at the time worked in roles directly linked to the policy formulation and analysis of UC. Others were in organisations working in partnership with DWP centrally, or with regional authorities and Jobcentre Plus locally. A third group worked in think tanks and organisations aiming to influence welfare policy formulation and delivery. Several of this latter group had previous experience of working within the Civil Service in different departments. This highlights a common 'revolving door' of politically and institutionally embedded knowledge, values and policy approaches (Stone et.al 1998; Hill, 2017) and demonstrates how policy formulation takes place both within and outside of government (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2014). A fuller description of the research participants can be found in chapter four.

While much emphasis is put on elites within institutions, Page and Jenkins (2005) argue that middle ranking civil servants play a crucial role in the policy process. They are especially important in the formulation of policy which is here understood as the activity of deciding who gets what, when and how in society. The policymakers in this research ranged from senior managers, through middle managers to more junior manager levels. They were chosen specifically due to the role they had at the time within the policy process, often writing policy proposals, offering alternative policy solutions, and deciding what knowledge and evidence to bring to – and exclude from - the policy discussion. As such they both bring about change to existing policies as well as formulate new ones (Béland, 2016).

The CA sees policymakers as social actors who are not neutral or objective (Robeyns, 2017). Instead, they actively interact with a process that consist of both policy formulation and policy implementation (Hill, 2017). For example, civil servants in policy roles formulate welfare policies. They write legislation and regulations, which in turn are implemented on the front line in Jobcentre Plus offices all around the country. This thesis adds to existing literature by looking at the whole policy process and the culture, values and assumptions that underpin it. Muers (2020) argues that the policy process is inherently value based and that the value judgements and assumptions that policymakers inhabit affect the lens through which the world is seen and understood, which will flow through into the policy process at any level.

Policies are rarely developed in isolation from the world around them (Béland, 2016). Sometimes they come about due to specific social or economic events, other times simply because a new government wants to make a change based on their political ideology. Richardson (2017) uses austerity policies introduced since 2010 as an example of policy change emanating from political ideology. The relationship between UC and austerity driven welfare reforms was set out in chapter three including how policymakers were also affected by austerity in their everyday professional life.

The next section looks more closely at the assumptions, values and knowledge of policymakers involved in designing UC policy and discusses how established knowledge and evidence has failed to be translated into policy goals and measures. This deeper understanding of policymakers' motivations helps explain the sense of policy mismatch that runs through this thesis.

5.2.2 The role of values and ideas in policymaking

Values are core elements of the CA as explained in chapter two but are often 'officially' absent in the policymaking process. Instead, there is a dominance of 'value neutral' and 'technocratic' style of policymaking in most western countries (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2014; Institute for Government, 2020). Advocates of the CA encourage focussing on what is ultimately important. In their view the policy process should ask what the end goal of the policy is, and whether the policy considers how people's circumstances help or hinder them in creating a good life (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017). This would involve setting a vision for and choosing a particular course of action to solve a specific issue or problem where policymakers' own ideas are given space

to influence options alongside more 'neutral' or external sources of information. However, as Maybin (2016) discovers which external sources of information makes it to the table of the policymakers is often a process of personal interactions between external individuals, organisations and civil servants, rather than an objective and systematic selection process.

This thesis adopts an understanding of ideas as "normative or causal beliefs held by individuals or adopted by institutions that influence their attitudes and actions" (Emmerij, Jolly and Weiss, 2005, p.214). These causal beliefs will influence the attitudes, discourse and actions of policymakers (Béland and Cox, 2011). Muers (2020) translates culture and values as a combination of "written and unwritten rules that define the institutions within which people operate" and "fundamental assumptions of how the world works" (p.7). Furthermore, ideas and institutions influence each other in the production of policy knowledge, and policy goals and strategies have feedback effects that re-shape the same goals (Béland and Cox, 2011). One such feedback loop may be between those designing policies and the frontline staff delivering the policy. The latter is within the field of welfare policy a common lens through which scholars investigate issues such as agency, and inter-related agency among frontline workers and welfare recipients (see for example Wright, 2003; Brodkin: 2013, Blaxland, 2013; Zacka 2017; Kaufman, 2020). Fewer studies have covered the motivations and behaviour of 'upstream' policymakers, including how their actions are shaped, enabled and constrained by the structural context of the policymaking process itself (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Ingold and Monaghan, 2016; Monaghan and Ingold, 2019; Wright, 2012).

Many of the participants in this research did not consider themselves a 'policymaker', despite all having a role in giving policy advice or recommendation to Government Ministers, Parliamentary Select Committees, media outlets, local governments or other organisations. Instead, many considered themselves "*policy informers"* where their role would be to give advice and recommendations based on what they experienced 'on the ground' or based on external or internal sources of evidence. These individuals saw their primary role as providing information on whether the UC policy aims were "*doable"* or *"implemented as intended"* thereby abstracting their role away from scrutinising the goals of the policy. In their view this also distanced them

from inspecting whether the goals corresponded with existing knowledge and evidence. A 'policymaker' was instead described as someone working directly on legislative frameworks and having direct responsibility for the policy aims and design.

Even those that did have a direct role in deciding final policy options distanced themselves from the UC in-work progression policy and expressed unease about the policy measures. To cope with this dilemma, they talked about *"parking own beliefs"*, *"taking that hat off"* and concentrating instead on *"what we can deliver"*. Others thought of themselves as *"a critical friend"* whose job it is to *"influence and shape policy aims"* although not necessarily change them substantially. Overall, acting as *"guardians of taxpayers' money"* was seen as paramount, reflecting their understanding of the UC rationale described in section 5.3.3. Despite their reluctance to adopt an active role in setting policy goals several voiced frustrations about the policy process which one policymaker in a civil service role described as *"more art than science"*. This illustrates a sense of unease and frustration of how they feel constrained in expressing their values within the policy environment.

In contrast to these 'reluctant' policymakers, others did consider themselves 'active' policymakers. This applied as much to individuals within as outside of government departments. Interestingly, almost everyone working in external organisations considered themselves as policymakers whose main aim was trying to influence the UC policy from the outside.

"*Well, we don't sit round a table and write a policy with them but ... I mean we go to these meetings and we say what's going on, on the ground and issues that we're experiencing or that our customers are experiencing, and DWP listen to us and they challenge us and we challenge them, and it's actually a really healthy environment at times. And at times it can get a little bit, not feisty, but you know we are really passionate about our services and our customers and we, if we feel that something's wrong, then we tell them about it*!"

(Policymaker 15, External Organisation)

The accounts above highlight what Richardson (2017) calls a change in British policymaking over the past 30-40 years from a more consensual policy process, to a more executive style of top-down policymaking dominated by Westminster ideology and political rhetoric. This has led to a more constrained relationship between different

government departments (for example much greater influence by the Treasury overall) and has reduced civil servants' ability to develop negotiated policy ideas (Richardson, 2017). Furthermore, when consultation takes place, its effectiveness depends on how aligned the ideas and views from the ground are to the dominant policy or political narrative at the time. Influence is also found to rely on personal interactions and contacts which carry the risk of disappearing when a particular policymaker moves or changes jobs (Maybin, 2016). The latter is a frequent occurrence in the Civil Service and criticised as a reason for lack of institutional knowledge (Sasse and Norris, 2019; Slater 2022).

Whose voice is heard and what evidence is acknowledged and translated into the policy process is therefore closely related to a shift in greater focus on policy delivery rather than policy formulation (Richardson, 2017). The next section looks at how policymakers felt constrained in their attempts at bringing knowledge and evidence into the policy process.

5.2.3 Policymaking as translation of ideas

Policymaking has traditionally been thought of as a rational process of linear knowledge transfer in order to solve policy problems, (Hall, 1993; Hill, 2017). This and the next chapter will however describe how the UC policymaking process has in fact been more akin to a 'messy' affair where policy is rarely designed, implemented or delivered exactly as intended (Zacka, 2017).

Ingold and Monaghan (2016) discuss five key dimensions of the policy process: the perceived policy problem, agenda-setting, filtration processes, the policy apparatus and the role of translators. The agency of the individual policymaker influences how knowledge or evidence is formed and used at each of these stages. Many policymakers in this research thought the last decade had seen the emergence of an institutional *"culture of pushing back"* and reluctance to engage with external advice, views or evidence. Richards and Smith (2016) suggest this has shrunk the "deliberative space for critical engagement" (p.501).

"Is it [UC] evidence led? I think if you look at…..I think it probably is, but you know, you can point to really significant changes in the last five years that have… that have been based on intuition or on sort of magic thinking rather than evidence."

(Policymaker 9, Government)

"we're not as systematic as we can be in gathering evidence and in setting up interventions in a way that enables us to gather the right evidence and understand what works for whom and why and how things work. So… I think we're not bad but I think we're not great, and I think in some ways it's probably got worse in recent years."

(Policymaker 7, Government)

Some of the individuals working in external organisations felt that it was harder to get their evidence and ideas heard than had been the case previously:

"at the moment, I'm sitting on a whole heap of evidence about Universal Credit and the introduction of it and the implementation of it and the difficulties that various people have with it, and currently they won't really even meet us to be honest, they're just not interested at all. So that is really quite frustrating!"

(Policymaker 8, External Organisation)

In contrast, those working in organisations which regularly met with DWP and Jobcentre Plus representatives felt they were heard and found the interaction useful at both the local and national level:

"it's useful for us to hear kind of policy changes or things that are forthcoming from the horse's mouth so to speak. So to have someone who's relatively high up at DWP saying, listen, this is what we're doing at the moment, these are the issues that we're addressing, this is what we're considering for the future, and we're able to influence those sort of decisions with our feedback, I think is really, really useful."

(Policymaker 15, External Organisation)

Nugroho et al. (2018) look at the role of local knowledge in the design, development and implementation of policies and argue that "it is a mistake to ignore local knowledge,

as it plays a key role in improving public policy at both local and national levels." (p1). They define local knowledge as the "knowledge that people in given communities or organisations have accumulated over time through direct experience and interaction with society and the environment." (p.3). Policymakers that were working in organisation rooted in local communities found they had good relationships with the local and regional DWP managers which they found were *"fantastic"* and *"really proactive and keen to work with local partners"*. However, there was a sense that the relationship depended on specific individuals and that this positive collaboration was not the case everywhere:

"it very much depends. With some we have regular meetings where we can go and we can air the issues that we're experiencing, and DWP are there to take on that feedback, take it away. In other areas it's less proactive, so it kind of depends on who's doing the job." (Policymaker 15, External Organisation)

Despite this positive experience, the same policymaker voiced a level of frustration at how the DWP kept 'shifting the goalposts':

"because UC is being rolled out so agilely and they're constantly making changes to the system, we find that there are, you know, there's potentially a quarter between our meetings, and within that quarter there have been, you know, massive changes to the system because I know DWP are meeting every couple of weeks I think, the people in the hierarchy of UC are meeting every couple of weeks to discuss changes and actually implement changes. So it's a bit of a good and bad that it's, you know, it's great that they're taking on feedback from us and they're making regular changes to the system, so that's great, it's just that it's a shame that we don't find out about them at the time!" (Policymaker 15, External Organisation)

Shifting goalposts and delayed policy implementation have been hallmarks of UC (Timmins, 2016). Since it was first introduced in April 2013 elements of the policy have changed considerably and full roll-out dates continually changed (Hansard, 2020). Some policymakers argued this has made the policy more "*nimble"* and easier to simplify. However, Alison and Andrea, two of the UC claimants introduced in chapter

five said the constant changes had made them *"feel like guineapigs"*. Hence, whilst UC makes for a 'simpler benefit system' in the eyes of the policymakers some argue that the simplicity appears more beneficial for the Government than for UC claimants (Summers and Young, 2020).

The policymaker accounts above illustrate how the relationship between whose ideas, and whose knowledge enters the process of policy formulation is not straightforward. UC is a high-level idea of solving a complex benefit system which at the time of its conception was largely met with political consensus (Sainsbury, 2014; Millar and Bennett, 2017). This initial consensus might have constrained knowledge transfer from previous welfare systems, and policymakers believed UC was conceived within a *"brave new world"* atmosphere where a culture of contesting external knowledge emerged in the first years of policy development.

"Evidence would come in and people would say, well that's just clearly wrong. And our initial reaction was to look at all the gaps in it, as opposed to saying, this is a welcome contribution…….things like getting paid monthly, which is not evidence based at all, was there to stay, there was nothing you could do to inform that, or change it!"

(Policymaker 3, Government)

This section has looked at how policymakers were constrained in translating external evidence into an ever-changing UC policy process. It has also illustrated how individual agency, values and beliefs were unable to influence a capability restricting policy culture in most cases. The next section will look at how policymakers understood the UC in-work progression policy and how they thought this policy would benefit low-income workers.

5.3 Policymakers' views of Universal Credit and understanding of progression

5.3.1 Views of Universal Credit policy rationale

The previous section outlined the role of values and ideas in the policymaking process. This section will look more deeply at how policymakers understood the goals of UC and in particular the reason for extending conditionality to people already in work. As was the case for Monaghan and Ingold (2019), policymakers in this research believed that the overall aim of UC was to save money. The ultimate motivation for UC was also seen as ideological rather than 'value neutral' and individual policymakers felt constrained in their efforts to meaningfully influence the goal of the policy:

"Its controlling….controlling benefits spending"

(Policymaker 12, Government)

The expansion of conditionality to those already in low-paid work in particular was linked to a wider aim of reducing tax-credit spending rather than the stated goal of reducing in-work poverty (DWP, 2010; 2018, Mc-Gregor Smith, 2021).

"in the world of paying out benefits, for many decades now there's been the view that if you are out of work and claiming benefits you are required to do something about it, now the question is being raised about saying, well have you drawn the line in the right place, what if you're earning you know £50 a week and you're working six hours a week, is it right that we'll pop you up to a higher level, or if you've got a self-employed business that might be earning very low level, we'll top that up with Tax Credits."

(Policymaker 1, Government)

"they [politicians] think that people can't get a leg up indefinitely".

(Policymaker 5, Government)

Most also thought UC was largely a continuation of an existing trend to focus on activation and employment within the benefit system:

"If you ask any of our ministers or senior leaders, what is Universal Credit, I think they would be keen to sort of say, it's not six benefits into one and blah di blah, you know, it's, that it's work, progression in work, that's what it's about, it's making it easier and more attractive for people to get into work and stay in work and progress in work. All the design stuff, you know, combining six benefits, that's a kind of means to an end, that's to sort of facilitate that, but it's, the end goal is employment, so …I think it's become, I think it has become a stronger narrative in the work of the department. In just making, you know, the sort of regimes for different benefit groups more active"

(Policymaker 2, Government)

These accounts demonstrate how the dominant ideas in UC policy formulation was aligned with a dominant rhetoric of ALMPs which throughout the period of developing UC was accompanied by economic austerity. Monaghan and Ingold (2019) describe how the prevailing austerity paradigm decided much of what type of evidence was heard, seen and trusted in the process of designing UC policy, and how DWP policymakers were constrained in their agency of bringing alternative voices into the policy process. This lack of alternative voices and evidence may have drowned out important aspects of questioning the goal of the in-work progression policy.

The next section will therefore look at how policymakers understood the concept of 'in-work progression' and how this view aligns with the policy definition. This understanding is critically examined and then compared to how 'progression' was understood in UC claimants' everyday lives in chapter seven.

5.3.2 Policymaker understanding of in-work progression

In-work progression is defined by UC as "earning more" and "becoming self-sufficient and ultimately independent of the welfare state" (DWP, 2016, p.1). The policy requirement is that "claimants who can reasonably be expected to work have a responsibility to seek opportunities for earnings progression" (DWP, 2016, p.4) and will have to take mandatory action in order to increase their earnings by taking on extra work or gaining higher wages (DWP, 2018, McGregor-Smith, 2021). It has been called a 'work first then work more' (Jones, 2022) approach that fails to take into account the

reality of low-paid and precarious work on the one hand and the role of employers on the other. The policy contains no detail about how this earnings increase will be achieved. However, as chapter three explains people are in general expected to meet a certain number of hours of work set out in their CC and can be sanctioned if they do not fulfill this requirement (Wright and Dwyer, 2020). This 'progression by hours worked' was also the dominant understanding among the upstream policymakers in this study:

"Ultimately it focuses on a single metric that it can measure, which in this case is earnings, and that means… frankly, that means hours in employment, and so that means changing job or getting another job and that's, you know, that's what they're focused on." (Policymaker 9, Government)

Hence, policymakers confirmed that the policy first and foremost is focussed on increasing hours of work, rather than finding higher quality jobs with better terms and conditions, or better pay:

"In the Jobcentres I think it is defined as how many started to work more hours, how many of them earn more money." (Policymaker 2, Government)

The CA advocates for policies being based in broad information bases (Sen, 1999). The narrowness of this policy is not only opposed to the CA belief in holistic policy measures but also at odds with a more traditional labour market understanding which includes improvements in pay and/or conditions in addition to the more common 'movement up the ladder' (Bailey, 2016b). Previous government research shows that benefit claimants think of progression as improvements not only in pay but also as improvements in conditions, for example job stability or permanency (Hoggart et al., 2006; Hendra et al., 2011). Having a 'steady job' has frequently been voiced as labour market progress (Hoggart et. al, 2006, Stuart 2016). Furthermore, the need to balance work and care and having an understanding line manager are essential components of a supportive labour market for those with caring needs (Edin and Lein, 1997; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Blaxland, 2013; Ingold and Etherington, 2013). Millar and Ridge (2020) followed families over a 15-year period and found that not only was

entering and sustaining employment a task that involved adults, children and social networks alike. They also found that even those families that had sustained employment over much of this period had not progressed to better paid work or more sustained work with better terms and conditions. Instead, they had become trapped in poorly paid and precarious work (see also Shildrick, et al., 2012). Furthermore, the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) reports on how low-paid work does not lead to progression in the conventional understanding of the concept: sustained and better paid work with better terms and conditions (D'Arcy and Finch, 2017; Friedman, 2021).

In contrast to the evidence above a narrow concept of progression had been adopted by several policymakers. They saw job stability and the quality of work as *"a thing that matters"* but not part of their definition of progression. Although one policymaker did question the concept of the in-work progression policy this was the exception rather than the rule:

"I do not associate this policy as having an aim of progression. There's no policy carrot available. And there's a potential mismatch between policy aspiration and policy offer". (Policymaker 3, Government)

The UC in-work progression policy appears to assume that people are free to behave according to government rules but studies using the CA have shown how social structures, such as social security systems, can constrain people in the choices they are able to make in their lives (Isola et al, 2020, Kim et al., 2020). The assumed behavioural freedom was also reflected in view of progression and whether welfare conditionality in general could be described as policy support.

The next section delves more deeply into how policymakers understood both progression and conditionality and the relationship between the two.

5.3.3 Disconnect between progression, conditionality and sanctions

Chapter three explained the UC conditionality regime in detail. It outlined how more people will have to comply with requirements to work, find more work, have regular meetings with their work coach and potentially travel long distances to fulfil their UC 'contract'. Failure to meet any of these requirements would risk being sanctioned and facing a financial penalty through a reduced UC allowance (DWP, 2022a, 2023a).

Chapter seven discusses how several of the UC claimants in this study had been sanctioned or felt under considerable pressure to comply with requirements in order to avoid being sanctioned. In accordance with recent evidence (Wright and Dwyer, 2020; Wright, 2023) claimants experienced sanctions as an ever-present threat that did not help them find, keep or stay in work for longer. This experience is also reiterated in other studies showing how sanctions make it more likely that people leave UC altogether but that their destination is not necessarily paid work (DWP, 2023c; Pattaro et al., 2022; Thomas, 2022). Chapter seven discusses how paid and unpaid work, conditionality and sanctions are all part of claimants 'whole life' and therefore experienced as 'two sides of the same coin'.

In contrast, conditionality and sanctions were not conceived as a holistic solution for the majority of the policymakers interviewed. They associated sanctions with an operational 'tool' for frontline services staff that was conceptually, and practically, separate from the more 'theoretical' policy concept of conditionality:

"I don't think you should equate sort of sanctions and an idea that widespread sanctioning is a bad thing, with conditionality as such, because I think sanctioning is part of conditionality…. I think but it's the, the severity at which you apply conditionality … sanctioning is a kind of separate issue to some extent.

(Policymaker 7, Government)

Conditionality was thus frequently thought of as a labour market participation measure, especially amongst the policymakers who worked as civil servants. One external policymaker thought that thinking of conditionality in this abstract way insulated the effects of sanctions from policymakers in government. Because they were working in an organisation rooted in local communities, they on the other hand were fully aware of the wide-ranging impacts sanctions could have on people's lives:

"sanctioning or stopping benefits [pause] the impact that might have on their health, their mental health, the amount that they have got to feed their kids, the amount that they can afford for their rent and their Council Tax……we see it having huge implications on all of those areas, debt and mental health and relationships at home and housing and the ability to heat their homes and all of those sorts of things"

(Policymaker 8, External Organisation)

Most of the government policymakers understood conditionality in a contractual or transactional sense where people have a right to be paid by the state in return for fulfilling certain expectations. However, when asked how this related to in-work progression, everyone in favour of conditionality simultaneously believed progression policies would need to flexible and take people's circumstances into account when applying the rules. Some did acknowledge the tension between sanctions and support and therefore thought that *"progression should be disentangled from conditionality".* They thought there was a difference between forcing people to take on more work and supporting people to improve their lives. Extensive force was seen as counterproductive, but conditionality was nevertheless perceived to have a role in *"building capability"* in order for people to progress at some point. Overall, the majority of the government policymakers felt UC claimants had an obligation to work and did not question that many were already complying and 'doing the right thing' by working hours that fitted around their family or other caring responsibilities. As one policymaker put it, the goalpost had now shifted to progression meaning *"doing enough of the right thing".*

When it came to the reason for extending conditionality to those already in work, most policymakers thought the ultimate motivation was to save money on the welfare bill. Several policymakers expressed this as the 'real reason' in-work progression had come about, although many wrapped it up in the context of wider individual and societal benefits:

"So it has you know lots of benefits, both to the … to the individual and the family, and to society in terms of generating additional economic demand, but also reducing the welfare bill. (Policymaker 7, Government)

"it's being called in-work progression I believe now because there's probably the negative kind of connotation of being called in-work conditionality. But I think if we think progression is moving…. is increasing pay, hourly pay, then an earnings rule that is based largely around the minimum wage isn't really progression.

(Policymaker 9, Government)

Among some policymakers there was also a sense that the Government wanted to avoid a low-hours and low-pay trap. This was seen as one of the problems with the legacy benefit system and the various 'hours rules' that had hindered some groups of benefit claimants from seeking to work more than 16 hours. Removing such cliff-edges in the benefit system has been outlined as one of the major motivations behind UC and the earlier New Labour idea of a 'single working age benefit system' (Freud, 2007; Freud 2021):

I think the main reason is because they're worried about people trading, people shifting down … so trading off fewer hours in employment and probably less income but the ability to spend more time with family, and their income not being as significantly lower as it would have been under the current, under the previous benefits system.

(Policymaker 8, External Organisation)

Aligned to the belief that progression, conditionality and sanctions were different, the majority of the policymakers interviewed believed sanctions was more of a deterrent and would not in practice be applied to people who were already in work:

"clearly I think there are risks and the department are aware of this to be fair, that people may be booked in for appointments that they can't make because they've, they're taking on an extra shift or because they've got a work commitment. They might be encouraged or even compelled to apply for jobs that are inappropriate because they can't reconcile it with the current job they've got, and therefore they need to exit that job. They might also be diverted to do activities, like training or whatever, that ultimately are kind of you know just giving them up to change jobs and move on. Now all of those I think are going to be challenges and risks but they're manageable as long as you're not really strictly applying the kind of, the stick bit of conditionality if you like.

(Policymaker 7, Government)

As will be discussed in chapters six and seven this assumption was disconnected from how the policy was implemented and experienced. Furthermore, over 40 percent of UC claimants are in paid work (DWP, 2023e) and although the statistics do not provide a detailed look at sanctions by employment status it is not unreasonable to assume some of these may have been sanction for not 'earning enough' as discussed by

Wright and Dwyer (2020). For many people working in low-paid jobs sanctions were therefore far from what one policymaker described as *"a theoretical big stick"* and instead it was a reality.

The next section takes a deeper look at policymakers' own desires and values and their own ability to achieve well-being and earnings progression. Their ability to convert their resources into achievable capabilities will be discussed alongside their acknowledgement that this option was unlikely to be available to those subject to the UC in-work progression requirements.

5.3.4 Progression in own life vs for 'others' in UC

Previous sections of this chapter have described a disconnect between abstract concepts of progression and conditionality and sanctions. This section describes how policymakers understood the concept of progression when applied to their own lives and careers. This helps understand how policy can become disconnected through a process of abstraction and translation.

When talking about their own life and their own jobs, all the policymakers described progression in broader terms than simply 'increased earnings'. For some it included a sense of horizontal movement. This implied having reached a level of experience where progression meant taking on more interesting jobs and utilizing their skills and expertise better without necessarily gaining higher pay. Progression could also mean lower work intensity by earning enough to afford working part-time and thereby gaining better quality of life. In alignment with the CA achieved work-life balance was the ultimate goal of working and none of the policymakers interviewed in this research were willing to take jobs in locations that disturbed this, even if that job would have meant pay progression. Work life balance was a multi-dimensional concept. It was seen as being able to work from home at times, work flexibly, living in close proximity to the countryside for recreational purposes and having a short commute to work that ideally could be done without a car, or even without long journeys on public transport.

It was therefore striking how policymaker's understanding of progression in terms of UC policy aims became narrow and only focussed on working more as compared to their own personal views. For some a holistic concept of progression was seen as an

ideal but also as difficult, or even impossible, to achieve within the current Jobcentre Plus regime:

"how do you operationalise a more kind of rounded view of progression within a sort of public employment service that inevitably is focused on job entry and benefit exit?"

(Policymaker 1, Government)

The majority of the policymakers therefore thought the outcome of the policy would be that people would increase their earnings by taking on several low-pay and low-hours work, as illustrated by Smith and McBride (2021). Several policymakers saw working two or more jobs as largely unproblematic and believed it was the responsibility of the individual to progress and that "being on UC is a sign of getting support". One policymaker did raise concerns about how working several low paid jobs over a life-course could result in lack of pensions due to each small job not reaching the threshold for National Insurance contributions. However, others believed there was a need to *"push people"* in order for them to see what "*opportunities are available to them*". The policymakers with the latter view did not mention what these opportunities might actually be in places where people claiming UC live. In fact, local economic and social factors were absent in all of the policymaker accounts.

The last section of this chapter will return to the CA and discuss what a multi-dimensional capability-based in-work progression policy might look like.

5.3.5 Progression as a multi-dimensional concept

The CA invites us to think about progression in a holistic and nuanced manner. As Bussi (2014) outlines, labour market policies have tended to equate 'progression' with 'employability' and in doing so the focus have been on individual outcomes defined as 'work first' or 'human capital acquisition' focussing on amending human behaviour to fit a quantitative policy outcome. Few labour market or welfare policies take the approach of the CA and look at individual choice in defining policy goals or policy outcomes (Orton, 2011). In line with this dominant paradigm most policymakers did not bring up wider factors such as education or skills as playing any particular part in the in-work progression policy. At best it was seen as "*something that mattered*" but not progression per se. Neither did any policymaker discuss the role of unpaid work,

such as care, as a valuable activity that could be incorporated into the in-work progression policy.

The role of employers on the other hand had more traction among policymakers, and some thought the in-work progression policy ignores the role of employers. These policymakers questioned how people could be expected to earn more when *"employers are the gatekeepers"*. Employers have been found to inhabit mixed views about the in-work progression policy but were in general sceptical to the concept (Jones, 2022). They are particularly sceptical about whether Jobcentre Plus workers have the capacity and skills to take on an in-work role on top of their more traditional role of job matching (Jones et al., 2019, p.12). Ingold (2020) furthermore found that several employers viewed Jobcentre Plus in negative terms because of the requirement for unemployed people to search for jobs for 35 hours a week which resulted in many employers receiving large numbers of unsuitable applications. Indeed, if progression is to be achieved as defined in the current policy (DWP, 2018 p.10) UC claimants in work have the choices of either increasing hours but not necessarily their hourly pay in their current job, advancing their (hourly) pay in their current job, earn more through taking on additional job(s) or move jobs. All of these options can be disruptive and costly to employers. Employers may not allow their employees to work for any other employers even in cases of zero-hour contracts without any guarantee of hours of work (Jones, 2022). Employers may instead prefer to have their employees 'on standby' to cover any gaps in rotas or unfilled shifts (Jones et al., 2019).

Reflecting this, those policymakers that acknowledged the role of employers as a vital part of the employment progression jigsaw thought the Government (although not necessarily DWP or Universal Credit) should influence employers to become 'better employers' that would offer training, development and contracts with better terms and conditions. They thought a happy or content workforce would be more productive and more likely to progress than an unhappy, non-progressing workforce, although the ability to incorporate this vision into policy goals seemed non-existent.

"I certainly personally subscribe to the view that if you want to make real in-roads into progression you've got to approach it from both angles, the supply side individual basis, but also the more sort of corporate, structural, the way the economy works and

basically look at how do employers structure workplaces, what are the progression routes?" (Policymaker 2, Government)

Jones et al (2019) found that employers thought training and skills development should be part of any in-work progression initiative. However, the interaction between conditionality and training, and the lack of specific support for training, has been found to be a major obstacle to progression for UC claimants (Gable, 2022).

5.4 Conclusions

This chapter has used the broad information base of holistic and human-centred policy development as advocated by the CA (Robeyns, 2017, 2020) to look at UC policy development. It has contrasted an ideal holistic understanding of progression as applied to policymakers' own careers with the narrow concept of the current UC in-work progression policy as designed. It has discussed the role of values and ideas in the policy process through qualitative interviews with policymakers in government departments as well as in external organisations. The policymaker accounts illustrate how their agency in designing and formulating policies is constrained by lack of nuanced knowledge of everyday life. They also felt constrained by institutional resistance to expand the evidence and voices heard in the policy process. These constraints made policymakers 'park' their own views and instead focus on policy delivery without detailed discussion of how to deliver the outcome of 'earning more'. Some policymakers felt compelled to take this approach in order to 'progress on and upwards' in their own careers and not limit themselves by challenging the 'office wisdom'. Others described how they would ideally like to take a more holistic approach to policymaking but felt constrained by a siloed and short-term policy focus as discussed by Slater (2022).

Richardson (2017) describes the past ten years, during which UC was designed and implemented, as a period of decreased consensual policymaking where only a set of narrow voices were heard. This has led to an environment of 'mandated imposition' of top-down government increasing the risk of policy failure (Richardson, 2017). The CA argues the need to broaden the information base and thereby the goals of economic

and social policies. Policymakers are active agents in the policy process but as illustrated in this chapter their freedom to bring their own experience of progression into the policy design is a case of reduced capabilities. Their accounts highlight how many things matter in their lives beyond ‘earning more’, for example having an interesting job; one that utilises their skills and knowledge; and one that fits into their family commitments. However, the focus on UC as a ‘brand new’ welfare system has constrained policymakers’ efforts to bring a wider set of voices and more extensive and external sources of evidence into the process of formulating policy objectives and outcomes.

The next chapter moves to the ‘mid-stream’ level of the policy process. It will focus on ‘implementation gaps’ and how the UC in-work progression policy is understood and delivered by frontline workers. A third empirical chapter will follow and will contrast the policymaker views with the everyday geographic lives of those experiencing the policy.

6 Policy implementation and experiences on the frontline

6.1 Introduction

This chapter contrasts abstract assumptions about policy implementation with the experiences of frontline workers in Jobcentre Plus. Frontline workers are considered 'mid-stream' in the policy process where they sit between the upstream policymakers from chapter five and the UC claimants furthest 'downstream' (Wright, 2012, Brodkin, 2017). This 'journey' through the policy process adds a novel contribution to the literature and evidence related to UC.

Drawing on secondary analysis of 20 interviews with work coaches and case managers, this chapter discusses progression in the context of frontline discretion, conditionality and caseload characteristics. The interviews took place immediately prior to and during the Covid-19 pandemic and covered a wider range of topics than can be included here. The frontline workers were not located in the same areas as the claimants covered in chapter seven. Hence there is no direct link between the experiences of delivering and experiencing UC policies. Chapter four sets out the research sample in more detail.

The insights from frontline workers are contrasted with primary data collected through interviews with the same policymakers as in chapter five. This allows the chapter to focus on how policy is made, shaped, changed and resisted by so called 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980, 2010). Frontline workers' understanding and delivery of policies has been shown to diverge from the policy intent as formulated by the managerial policymakers (Brodkin, 2013; Zacka, 2017). This 'implementation gap' will be explored from the angle of assumptions made by upstream policymakers which is contrasted with discretion at the frontline. The chapter looks at how the values and beliefs of frontline workers influence their ability and freedom to deliver more holistic and human centred policies.

The chapter mixes the voices of upstream policymakers with those of work coaches and case managers. This illustrates the disconnect found between assumed and actual policy implementation and discretion.

The first section looks at the upstream policymaking assumptions and contrast this to experiences of policy delivery. This is followed by a section assessing capability restricting and capability enhancing factors at the frontline before a deeper look at conditionality is conducted. The final section of the chapter looks at what holistic and human centred support might look like from the perspectives of frontline workers.

6.2 Policy implementation and capabilities on the frontline

6.2.1 'Upstream' assumptions about policy delivery

The policy implementation literature commonly focusses on the agency of the frontline workers. However, there is an argument that their actions are closely linked to the actions and values of senior managers in both back office and central policymaking positions (May and Winter, 2009). The decisions of senior managers can both directly influence policy delivery and provide the context in which frontline workers exercise discretion (Evans, 2016 p.603). Managers make policy decisions by setting priorities, allocating resources and translating requirements into delivery processes. This is part of the context in which frontline workers deliver services. Most of the 'upstream' policymakers in this research were acutely aware of this and thought the success of the UC in-work progression policy could not be disentangled from how it was delivered on the frontline:

"it will come down to you know what sort of targets are set and how, you know, how harshly they're measured as much as anything." (Policymaker 5, Government)

Targets and measures are ever present for most frontline workers, whether it is in mainly privately delivered welfare services such as in Australia (O'Sullivan et.al, 2021), or in a hybrid version of both private and public services as in the UK (Considine and O'Sullivan, 2015). When looking at the importance of targets it is useful to distinguish between measures that are directly linked to the policy intent, such as the UC in-work progression earnings threshold explained in chapter three, and more local targets originating from local or regional management's understanding of a policy. These may differ substantially between jobcentres (Grant, 2013). Although there may not have

been centrally designed sanctions targets at the time of the early UC roll-out many jobcentres had local performance measures that in practice amounted to sanctions targets (Wright and Dwyer, 2020; Redman and Fletcher, 2021). Chapter three explained how the same period saw the introduction of a strict performance system that is likely to have rewarded workers who followed the management's directives of meeting these local targets. However, the policymakers interviewed for this research were either not aware of these local practices, or they were unwilling to acknowledge them.

"But there's no harsh regime at all on Universal Credit at the moment, you know we're not, we're not … we haven't got any targets for our work coaches to be getting X number of people into work or into more work, you know, it's all, we're just measuring what happens really. (Policymaker 1, Government)

This illustrates the lack of local knowledge among some upstream policymakers and how they conceptually made a difference between conditionality and sanctions as discussed in section 5.3.3 in the previous chapter. There was a general belief among the upstream policymakers that UC would be delivered as a 'supportive carrot' rather than a 'punitive stick' because they believed that was part of the policy design. This view is undoubtably linked to the selective approach to evidence and knowledge in the early years of UC design and roll-out as exposed in the previous chapter.

However, some upstream policymakers acknowledged that extending conditionality to those already in work might not always be experienced as 'support' on the frontline:

"It will be about the design in the end. If it is a possible… a helpful intervention, then staff will be delighted to make it, in my experience. Sometimes though the Government introduces a policy in such a way that it also has a negative side, so that it then starts hassling people who, you know, who don't want help and who you know feel, feel themselves in a position where they're sort of optimising their income in relation to the other commitments that they have. And that's where it becomes more of an issue for staff, you know if they're, if they're seen, if their job is to try to force help on people who don't want or need it and then to sanction them if they don't take it, I think then it

has more negative connotations. But if it's targeted on those who do need and want help then you know it's wholly positive"

(Policymaker 7, Government)

The accounts above illustrate how people who design policies assume the policy will be implemented. However, policy 'as imagined' is not always the same as 'policy as implemented' and the next section will look at how frontline staff felt enabled or not to tailor the requirements placed upon UC claimants who were already working. Emphasis will be placed on whether they were able to convert the resources of time and caseloads into capabilities for progression.

6.2.2 Frontline discretion

There is now broad academic consensus that frontline staff are not merely 'passive' policy implementors but instead take on a role as active policymakers in their own right (Lipsky, 2010; Hill, 2017; O'Sullivan et. al., 2021). Furthermore, frontline workers exercise policy discretion not just as isolated individuals but also in accordance with particular organisations cultures and social contexts that inform their decision making (Brodkin, 2013; Caswell et. al., 2017). The ways that they are able to exercise discretion will be influenced by the governance of welfare services. O'Sullivan et al. (2021, p.36) argue that Australian frontline workers are subject to the same strict disciplinary approach as that experienced by benefit recipients largely due to greater marketisation. In the UK, Kaufman (2020) finds that private sector welfare workers were able to apply some discretion largely due to the ultimate decision-making being placed within central government agencies. Zacka (2017) underlines the 'moral agency' of frontline workers in delivering welfare to work policies but also highlights how the organisational environment and overall policy context frequently undermine that agency (p.241). As such frontline workers also have their capability space reduced by the same system that is found to constrain benefit recipients (Isola et. al., 2020). A major constraining factor for Jobcentre Plus workers was implementing UC in the context of economic austerity. Cuts to public services included DWP losing a quarter of its operational budget and over 30% of its staff between 2010 and 2015 (Timmins, 2016). More than 100 jobcentres closed down in the same period (Finn, 2018). This

inevitably resulted in greater pressures on and larger caseloads for the remaining workers.

In any welfare or employment policy the relationship between frontline workers and benefit claimants are at the heart of its ability to succeed (Ravn and Bredgaard, 2021). People claiming UC have a relationship with two sets of Jobcentre Plus frontline actors: case managers and work coaches. The case manager is responsible for processing UC payments and do not routinely have much contact with claimants although people can contact them via the digital UC journal. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic people could also call the UC helpline and be directly connected to their case manager. Since the pandemic this is no longer possible, and all calls go via generic phone agents, mostly employed by third party organisations. Case managers work in back offices usually located at some geographical distance from the people they serve. They mainly process payments and manage changes in circumstances and other issues related to UC eligibility and awards. They are also expected to signpost claimants to local support organisations in the geographical areas where claimants live.

Work coaches have the most personal relationship with claimants. They conduct regular face to face meetings in local jobcentres. The frequency of these meetings depends on a claimants' characteristics as set out in chapter three (see also Griffiths et. al, 2020, DWP, 2022b). In these meetings work coaches will monitor the conditionality requirements set out in the individual's CC as described in chapter three. The relationship with case managers and work coaches will therefore be shaped by a number of discretionary acts and decisions, ranging from the award of financial support and signposting or referrals to other support services, to payment penalties through to benefit sanctions. As Zacka (2017) outlines, *how* one is treated is as important as *what* one receives in financial or other support. It will influence whether people feel their frontline worker is 'on their side or not' and thereby the legitimacy of the policy itself.

The interviews with the upstream policymakers revealed how they believed UC to be designed as a flexible system that gave room for work coaches to apply discretion, for example through tailoring the CC according to the specific circumstances of each UC claimant. Some did voice concerns about this ill-defined 'catch-all' role of the work coach. These policymakers questioned the capability of frontline staff to take into

account wider personal characteristics within a working environment dominated by increasingly large caseloads, local performance measures, and an 'agile' policy design that frequently made policy changes affecting the day-to-day role of the frontline worker. In contrast to the previous New Deal advisers the UC work coach was not designed as a specialist role (OBR, 2018). Therefore, there is limited frontline expertise for the 'in-work' claimant group, which has been deemed as needing a very "different conversation and intervention" than the more traditional jobseeker (House of Commons, 2016, p.17). The lack of specialist training and knowledge about in-work claimants led some upstream policymakers to believe that frontline workers "*simply weren't aware of what they were supposed to be doing".*

In chapter five section 5.3.3 discussed how the upstream policymakers made a conceptual difference between conditionality as a fundamental 'rights and responsibilities' element of welfare policies on the one hand, and sanctions on the other. The latter was either ignored or seen as somewhat 'different'. Many of these upstream policymakers also had an idealised understanding of work coach discretion and tailoring of the CC. Many believed, or wanted to believe, that work coaches could easily accommodate people's caring responsibilities. Most thought this type of discretionary powers *should* be available but nobody actually *knew* whether this was the case.

"there's going to be more discretion for advisers…..So if it isn't a case that you can count things like informal care or, you know, volunteering or sort of socially useful activity, as time that can be offset against the sort of conditionality requirements. If that isn't the case, then I would certainly think it should be. But I suppose part of the issue is that we've moved to a more discretionary system where it's often now going to be at the discretion of advisers to make that judgement. So, in other words, if somebody's working like ten hours a week and they're spending ten or twenty hours a week doing informal childcare for neighbours or friends or relatives, then it should be the case that the adviser can count that as time spent … I don't know, I don't really know to be honest with you. (Policymaker 7, Government)

The upstream policymakers thought issues around discretion could be rectified with better training, but on the frontline the issue was more nuanced and rooted in wider and much more complex governance and policy issues - not least related to bringing six previous benefits under one roof. Many frontline workers previously delivered so called legacy benefits and many compared their current UC role to their past roles:

When I was dealing with jobseekers allowance the conversation was wrapped around have you found a job. Now.. with us dealing with that as well as rent, health, finance, relationships, finance issues. When you have those diaries with 10 minute appointments and you don't have space either side of it…. It's not ideal.

(work coach)

At the start of UC roll-out caseloads were small and more manageable. Work coaches typically had around 100 people on their caseload (House of Commons, 2016). As UC has rolled out further, combined with the Covid-19 influx of claimants almost doubling the number on UC (Summers et al. 2021), work coach caseloads have increased to about three times that of the early days and claimant circumstances and needs have diversified:

"Yes, for starters the types of people we deal with has multiplied. Personally, I always adapt to whoever I'm talking to and try to leave some wiggle room in case I've read a particular situation wrongly. And I have to be a lot more aware than normal that people are struggling. It's a difficult process to live through if you've just lost your job, relationship issues etc. are magnified and people may not be themselves. May be more aggressive than normal. That may not be them. It's very tough for everybody. Sensitivity basically, feeling your way into the conversation and being aware that what they tell you in 5/10 minutes is not the whole story.

(work coach)

The size and complexity of these caseloads have changed the way work coaches communicate with claimants, the time they have available and how they feel able to do their job. This will be elaborated on in the next section.

6.3 Capability restricting and capability enhancing factors on the frontline

6.3.1 Time and caseloads

People's ability to convert resources into capabilities and functionings that align with their values is at the core of the CA. This section will look at frontline staff's ability and freedom to act in accordance with the type of service they wanted to deliver, and which factors constrained or enhanced their ability to do so. An often overlooked dimension of service delivery is a spatial dimension to so called 'creaming and parking' (Carter and Whitworth, 2015; Whitworth, 2022) the practice where some claimants may be given preferential treatment over others depending on frontline workers' assumption of successful employment outcome or not (Bredgaard and Larsen, 2008; Considine et. al. 2011).

Some case managers complained about having particularly 'needy' claimants. These were often young jobseekers living in deprived areas of the country with access to the lowest amount of financial assistance. As a result, these claimants would be more inclined to ask for budgeting advances and other immediate financial help. Although the local context and the local labour market was important, even more important was lack of time to interact fully with people. This was acknowledged by the upstream policymakers, although no changes to the policy objectives were made in response.

"Do our staff have the capabilities and time? Probably … probably not. Not as much as they would like. We'll either focus then on you know helping those who are easiest to move on, so we're getting big bang, biggest bang for the buck, or focus most effort on those who are in the worst possible position you know to force you know, make a significant change rather than you know most of the people who might just need some sort of sensitive conversations around how we can optimise their lives for them."

(Policymaker 7, Government)

Work coaches found the 10 minutes interviews for those in the UC intensive labour market regime particularly challenging especially as caseloads increased during the Covid-19 pandemic:

"*the volume of people means you can't spend the same amount of time with them. It's a conveyer belt of people'"* (work coach)

As will be discussed in more detail in chapter seven, the lack of time and pressures on frontline workers led to one UC claimant saying they felt treated "*like a number and not like an individual".* The pressure to see people as quickly as possible, and policy implementation being driven more by diary pressures than policy ambitions, was frequently mentioned by those on the frontline:

"*If diaries are full and there's you know….. you want to do as many people as possible. By making appointments shorter… if we're not careful it just becomes a box ticking approach…. which you don't want."* (work Coach)

Within the constraints of large caseloads and time pressures many work coaches expressed deep concern for their claimants and felt a moral obligation and desire to help and support them. Many frontline staff lamented the lack of time for in-depth conversations which they thought was necessary if they were to fulfil the role as they valued.

"in an ideal world we would like more time to spend with customers – many don't have experience with the benefit system and that needs to be explained – they're you know in a state because they're panicking and we need to take time with customers to explain how the benefit system works and try and let them – give them a wee bit of assurance that things will work out, we will get benefits paid, giving them knowledge and just talking to give piece of mind – they're in a situation that they never expected they would find themselves in." (case manager)

"Appointment times have been cut and it is difficult. Some conversations you don't want whilst watching the clock. If you're not careful it takes the quality out of what you're doing. I understand at the moment you're dealing with numbers but you have to remember you're dealing with people too. (work coach)

The above section has described lack of time and size and characteristics of caseloads as capability constraining factors for both work coaches and case managers. This relates to the increase in UC claimants during the Covid-19 pandemic but UC claimant numbers have not fallen to pre-pandemic levels (DWP, 2023e) and will continue to increase as more people who either claim tax-credits or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) are moved across to UC (DWP, 2023d). Frontline workers are therefore likely to experience many of the same pressures as described in the section above.

The next section will describe how conditionality was perceived as both capability enhancing *and* constraining by frontline workers implementing UC on the ground.

6.3.2 Conditionality on the frontline

Whilst the upstream policymakers conceptually differentiated between conditionality and sanctions, this was not the case for work coaches. In the Jobcentre a work coach is both a 'gatekeeper' of conditionality rules and a 'door opener' for support and employment opportunities. This trade-off will be done in multiple ways depending on the capability of each individual. Research with frontline welfare agents in the UK describe how workers delivering the privatised Work Programme could avoid imposing sanctions themselves by referring cases to decisionmakers centrally placed in DWP (Kaufman, 2020). Work coaches follow a similar referrals process and the extent to which such referrals are actually done or not depends largely on the disposition of the frontline worker. Some will adopt a more coercive and uncompromising stance towards claimants, whilst others might choose to take on a more counselling or coaching role and, in some cases actually refuse to refer anyone (Kaufman, 2020).

Many work coaches thought sanctions were both a punitive measure and a tool for engagement. When used as a 'support' tool it was to (potentially) enhance someone's capability. Work coaches felt that the conditionality rules allowed them to suggest courses, provision and external support. Without the conditionality framework many work coaches felt they would be neglecting their duties and "*leaving people behind"*. In fact, despite the large increase in UC caseloads, the Covid-19 pandemic had the somewhat surprising effect of enhancing frontline workers 'conditionality capabilities' when benefit requirements were stopped during the first lockdown (March to July 2020)

and only gradually re-introduced thereafter (Summers et al., 2021; DWP 2022a). Scullion et al. (2022b) found that many claimants thought that the interaction with Jobcentre Plus frontline workers had been friendlier and more supportive during the Covid-19 pandemic when most behavioural conditionality requirements were paused. Similar sentiments were apparent in the interviews analysed for this research. However, some work coaches also felt torn between the different 'treatment' for different groups depending on whether they started claiming UC before, during or after the pandemic:

"So we have certain group of people who go along and do the basics – and in my opinion we never should have left everyone alone – I think they all should be going along the same line but they aren't, because they [new claimants] have conditionality but those before [March-July 2020 claims] haven't got conditionality and they have been left behind. (work coach)

Conditionality requirements framed all interactions with claimants for work coaches, both the supportive elements and the disciplining ones. Therefore, some work coaches felt the pause in conditionality for new claimants at the start of the pandemic caused problems further down the line when conditionality was re-introduced (DWP, 2022a):

"Even with the conditionality now – even asking them [new covid claimants] to tell us about their job searches and they're like "why – I know I am applying for jobs" but they've had six-nine months where they haven't had to do anything and now we are doing their commitments with them and I have to explain this is how UC works and they're like oh that's harsh – and that's how I explain it – how it was – how it is now – how it will be in the future. (work coach)

The accounts above illustrate how the claimant and work coach interaction, relationship and communication is deeply connected to the labour market conditionality regime. Some work coaches used it to provide a 'nagging service' (Jones and Kumar, 2022), with questionable outcomes in terms of rapport and trust (Patrick, 2018; Patrick and Simpson, 2020). During the period of 'Covid conditionality pause' many frontline staff felt they were given permission to "*just touch base with claimants"*;

to simply have a chat without targets to fill or rules to comply with. Frontline workers talked about this period in positive terms and indicated it had improved their ability to fill their role according to what they valued – in particular "*being there"* for people they have served for many years. They cherished the opportunity to simply call people they worried would not have had any other interactions with the outside world as most other support organisations had closed their doors and many struggled to switch to digital provision (Edmiston et al. 2022).

"it lifts the perception that we're only here to beat you with a big stick … we can talk to them like a person – you hear it in their voice over the phone - the relief".

(work coach)

"I know some think the importance lays with getting customers through but I don't agree with that. I think customers need human contact… just need to give them as much support, more money and more individual support. Our list is all there – there are plenty of contact points that we can give – the issue is do we have time to give it?"

(case manager)

The tension between conditionality having both an enabling and constraining function on the frontline is important. During the Covid-19 pandemic one case manager emphasised the need to "*just be human"* and several of the work coach and case manager interviews illustrate greater freedom to act according to their personal values. Post-pandemic the same case managers and work coaches talked more negatively about going back to 'business as usual' which meant re-introducing conditionality and restricting their ability to engage with claimants in more flexible ways. They expressed views about how the nature of the interactions had changed and voiced disagreements with this change which they felt put more pressure on themselves as well as claimants.

This section has outlined how conditionality can be both a constraining and enabling factor for frontline workers. The next section looks at how work coaches envisaged a more holistic approach to engagement and progression.

6.4 Holistic support

6.4.1 Whole person approach on the frontline

The CA considers individual freedoms within their wider contexts. This means looking at the whole household not just individuals in isolation (Alkire, 2002, Robeyns, 2017). Most of the frontline workers recognised the need to understand the wider household situation of people. This was not always possible in their 'business as usual' world and many would compare their current constrained situation to the autonomy they had when working on short term pilots or trials. They clearly valued the autonomy they had in these enhanced pilot roles and valued the chance to have quality conversations and time to listen to the person in front of them.

Do you feel you have enough flexibility and autonomy as a work coach? (Interviewer)

"No. This is something that is talked about but constantly eroded. When it works out it can be a very important relationship and you generally get to know and understand customers in a 3D way. Not saying we're experts and get it right all the time but it's unfortunate…… it's a useful relationship… but it's being eroded at the moment.

When you say in a 3D way…..? (Interviewer)

"I tend to feel most people have 5 pillars, health, finance, accommodation, work and family….and if you lose one then that has immediate effect or puts others at risk. When you talk regularly you know that customer very well. You deal with a customer, support and gain trust and once you have built up trust you deal with the whole family. They might ask - can my partner get this? May have a partner who is eligible. They may ask about a husband, son or daughter. When talking about who is employed, they may have children. So, you explain this is what your children will need…. It is the bigger picture, longer term whole household, it is a motivational project."

(work coach)

People working on the frontline in welfare delivery endured enormous pressure during the Covid-19 pandemic (Summers et al. 2021). Pausing conditionality appears to have helped those on the frontline to convert their time into more valuable capabilities.

Without the capability constraining factors of strict rules and management targets work coaches appear to view people and their circumstances in a more holistic way. This contrasts with the upstream policymakers who (pre-pandemic) thought that taking a 'whole person' approach to policy design was *"too difficult"*. Recent figures of increased sanctions among UC claimants post pandemic (DWP, 2022a) indicates this latter view again dominates and constrains the capability of those on the frontline wanting to deliver a holistic service.

6.4.2 Progression on the frontline

DWP conducted a trial of UC in-work progression between 2015 and 2018. The trial was aimed at claimants in the 'light touch' conditionality regime, for example those whose income fell between the Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET) and the Conditionality Earnings Threshold (CET) as explained in chapter three. The progression 'offer' or policy intervention to be tested consisted of more frequent meetings with a work coach and the risk of sanctions for not attending. Attending meetings would have been difficult to accommodate for this group of claimants given they were already in work. The trial resulted in very small financial gain in the short term (£5.24 per week) for those who attended meetings most frequently, which disappeared in the longer run (DWP, 2018b). What frontline workers actually felt about this trial, and about having in-work claimants on their caseload, is not included in the published report (DWP, 2018).

The narrow definition of progression in this trial and subsequent policy statements, contrasts with views among frontline workers in this research. Work coaches emphasised that for progression to lead someone into a career, they need to be able to offer jobs that are relevant to people's qualifications, skills and interests. The desire to offer something that both they and their claimants saw as valuable became more apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic (Scullion et al., 2022a). Prior to the pandemic work coaches admitted they might ask claimants to seek help from family and friends in order to fit in another low-paid job, on top of what they were already doing. Often these second or third jobs would take place at the weekends where no formal childcare would be available. This pre-pandemic pressure to find 'more of the same' was confirmed by parents interviewed as part of this research (see chapter seven). As a result of Covid-19 pressures, work coaches appear to have shifted their pre-pandemic

views in relation to people having to enter ‘any job’ to a greater appreciation of the circumstances that brought people to the jobcentre. Work coaches talked about the variation of people coming through their doors during the pandemic. This included people who had been furloughed or had lost their jobs as a result of lockdowns. They also talked about people who had not previously had any engagement with the Jobcentre who tended to be better skilled and have higher qualifications. Having a more skilled cohort of people on their caseloads did however not make for an easier job match for work coaches. They would talk about trying to fit ”*square pegs in round holes”* and having to convince people with degrees to take on lower skilled jobs.

In-work progression has received renewed interest following the 2022 Budget announcement of increasing the earnings threshold in UC (DWP, 2022b). However, the goal of progression continues to be individual increases in earnings, with no accompanying policy offer of training or similar support. Scullion, Jones and Wright (2022) believe this renewed policy focus will put more pressure on a group of people who are already struggling. In the research interviews analysed for this thesis work coaches mentioned ‘talking about’ progression but felt they had few tools at their disposal. At the core of this chapter is therefore the issue that although many work coaches did try to accommodate individual needs, their ability to do so was hampered by a conditionality regime that only truly values formal paid work. Claimants in chapter seven felt that *“If it doesn’t pay it doesn’t count”.* Some work coaches would allow parents with children to work within school hours which one work coach thought was a “*good way of keeping them in the job market”* reinforcing the focus on formal paid work being the ultimate goal. However, tailoring the CC to accommodate other activities, such as volunteering, happened more rarely. When it did work coaches would talk about allowing *“genuine activities”*, such as helping well known local or national charities. Running a community group or another local initiative would not always pass the work coach ‘test’. Tailoring the CC is therefore at the very heart of the in-work progression policy. It was through that action that work coaches were most likely to make judgements as to who might deserve such discretion, and who might not. As in the case of Senghaas (2021) the interviews with work coaches for this research reveal how they often made normative decisions based on claimants’ appearance, manners, language and emotions.

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter has looked at the UC in-work progression policy through the lens of frontline implementation. It has discussed which capabilities are available on the frontline and the tension between frontline workers' experiences, their holistic view of progression, their individual values, and their freedom to deliver UC according to these values. Their accounts expose a disconnect between assumed and actual policy delivery.

This chapter concurs with the consensus among the 'street level' literature that policies are often implemented in ways that diverge from the policy intent (Zacka, 2017). Secondary analysis of work coach and case manager interviews confirms that for UC, and in particular the in-work progression element, frontline workers act according to their own values, beliefs and their own interpretation of the policy where they can. The only 'progression support' they were able to offer the in-work segments of their caseload, were more or less frequent conversations and in some cases tailoring the number of hours they expected someone to work. What they believed to be just, acceptable and realistic was therefore influenced more by their own value judgements in combination with local performance measures, than by the policy assumptions outlined by upstream policymakers. This demonstrates how frontline staff are part of the overall policy process and how they through their actions shape and mediate policies (Lipsky, 2010; Brodkin, 2017; van Berkel et al., 2018). It also shows how UC as implemented deviates from the high-level policy design narrative around UC.

The chapter has discussed how many frontline staff expressed a desire for a holistic approach and wanted to consider 'the whole person'. However, just as the upstream policymakers felt restricted by a siloed approach to policy design, the frontline workers in this chapter felt restricted by contextual factors such as time, caseload size, and a jobcentre compliance culture. As will be shown in the next chapter, this has not only created a policy mismatch between policy as intended and everyday lived experiences. It has also reduced frontline workers' agency to provide a service they value.

7 Policy experiences among low-income families

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the experiences of the UC in-work progression policy in practice as experienced by low-income families in one particular location in Northern England. This contrasts to chapters five and six which examined the understanding of in-work progression from the viewpoints of policymakers and frontline workers. It further develops the issue of policy mismatches discussed in the preceding chapters by analysing the relationship between families' everyday spatial strategies for balancing paid work and other activities, with the policy requirements discussed in chapter two.

The CA is used as a lens for analysing to what extent the UC in-work progression policy allows families real freedom to act in accordance with their values and what matters to them. It is based on accounts from in-depth qualitative interviews with 15 low-income parents with dependent children. The majority (13) lived in two areas in Oldham, Greater Manchester. A further two parents piloted in the research lived in other parts of the country and they have been included in the research sample because their experiences mirror those in Oldham and illustrates that the issues discussed are not place specific, although place factors are important in different ways for different people. This underscores the CA's call for policies to acknowledge how different people in different places need different resources in order to create better lives. Further details about the research sample and location can be found in chapter four.

Chapter five described how many policymakers were able to achieve a balance between work and the rest of their life but felt restricted in bringing the same values to the policymaking process. This chapter contrasts this by exploring how parents who claim UC experience the policy. It analyses to what extent specific policy elements provide resources that can be converted into capabilities of value. Placing most of these experiences in two geographical locations allows for a spatial analytical framework to be used alongside the CA, as discussed in chapter two.

The chapter adopts a narrative approach and individual stories to describe the experiences of some of the research participants. These stories illustrate three

different dimensions of the CA in relation to the UC in-work progression. First, the stories allow for holistic and human centred insights into 'life on UC'. Second, the individual stories illustrate how elements of policy in general, and the in-work progression policy in particular, constrain people's freedoms in varying ways. Third, the narrow value of progression measured by formal paid employment only is contrasted with individuals valuing both paid and unpaid work, community engagement, leisure time and other meaningful activities. Together these stories create a holistic understanding of UC that places people's everyday lives at the centre of the policy. Narrating them alongside the policymaker and frontline worker experiences in chapters five and six provides a valuable addition to existing literature of UC experiences. Most of the policy elements are described through the experiences of female single parents or female lead carers in couple families. However, the experiences of two separated parents (one male and one female) are also included to illustrate how UC not only contains narrow progression goals but is also built on narrow assumptions of modern family lives and work-care relationship in different family types. This chapter answers the third research question in section 1.3.

The chapter starts by describing how the research participants themselves experienced the place they lived and how austerity policies is both an aggregate financial and everyday spatial experience (Hall, 2019a). It then focusses on UC and delves deeper into experiences of specific elements of the policy, most prominently the CC and the experience of frontline discretion in relation to conditionality, sanctions and the tailoring of requirements. The last section of the chapter details what an ideal progression policy might look like for them if they could choose.

7.2 Everyday experiences of austerity

Former industrial towns and cities in England have been particularly hard hit by economic austerity policies (Gray and Barford, 2018). Most of the participants in this research lived at the time of fieldwork in such a town. Chapter three described Oldham's industrial heritage, de-industrialisation over several decades (Beatty and Fothergill, 2020a), and the most recent budget cuts in the name of economic austerity (Centre for cities, 2019). The areas in which the participating families lived still resembles the "poverty streets" described by Lupton (2003) twenty years ago. These two wards share many characteristics, including being amongst the 10 percent most

deprived in England on multiple measures (Oldham, 2019b). They both consist of large post-war housing estates built in the pre- and post-war 'boom' in social housing (Spratt, 2022) and have a predominantly white and low-skilled population. At the time of fieldwork in 2017-18, around 12 and 14% of the population in these two areas claimed either UC or ESA and 38% of the adult population had no qualifications (Oldham, 2019b). At that time child poverty in the two fieldwork areas was 46% and 54% respectively (Greater Manchester Poverty Action, 2019) largely driven by the falling value of social security benefits as well as low pay. The median household income in the areas was £18,000 in 2018 compared to £22,000 in Oldham (Oldham, 2019b) and £28,400 in the UK overall (ONS, 2019). At the same time the local employment rate was 53% compared to an Oldham average of 68.4% and UK average of 75% (Oldham, 2019b). Much of the local employment opportunities on offer were what Shildrick et al (2012) have described as the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' of insecure, or precarious, employment which includes both low paid self-employment and lack of security and permanency in employment contracts or pay (Bivand and Melville, 2017). Oldham introduced UC on the 29 July 2013. It was the second Jobcentre to do so after its neighbour in the south Ashton-Under-Lyne.

One of the research participants, Lucy, moved here in 2015 when her children outgrew the smaller house she rented from the council in another part of town. Lucy is in her mid-30s and is in a 'living together apart' relationship with the father of her two youngest children. She also has three older children from a previous relationship. I met Lucy twice. The first time her youngest child was only 9 months old and she had yet to return to work after their birth. The second time, six months later, Lucy had both started and lost a job and was actively searching for a new job. Lucy was moved to UC when she moved house and therefore fell into the so called 'natural migration' group of people where changes in circumstances forced a move to UC from previous benefits (DWP, 2023d)

It is not easy to find a space to escape from the effects of austerity for Lucy and her children. The local youth club has closed down, leaving teenagers hanging out around the bus shelter opposite her house. This means she will not allow her children out after school for fear of them getting into trouble and falling in with the *"wrong crowd".* These neighbourhoods have a troubled past. Another participant also mentioned *"dodgy*

gangs of kids coming down". However, not everyone felt unsafe. Feelings of safety depended on which street you lived on. Those nearest to schools and the main street with shops and offices felt safer. Whilst those living at the edges, both felt unsafe from people and from the polluted air that drifted their way from the nearby motorway.

Safety, and the need to be present in children's lives, is a common theme in research with low-income parents (Edin and Lein, 1997; McKenzie, 2015). Avoiding children falling in with the wrong group, or being targeted by the wrong people, takes time and sets limit for parents' own activities. The need to be a 'good parent' is also tangled up with creating an identity and having a role (Edin and Kefalas, 2011). Most of the parents I spoke to thought keeping their children safe, fed, well dressed and up to date with schoolwork was valuable above all else. However, as discussed in chapter two, their ability to choose and prioritise these activities is not considered valuable nor productive by UC.

The library does not offer much of an alternative safe space for families and young adults as it is only open three afternoons a week allowing children to visit for short times after school. This means that if parents wanted to use the library computers, for example to log into their UC account, they would find it hard to concentrate amidst the chatter of a group of excited 7 years olds, never mind find any privacy. For those favouring outdoor spaces a nearby nature reserve is only a few minutes' drive away. But if you do not have a car you would need to walk with your children along a busy main road without pavements or streetlights. You could also pay £5 for a bus ticket and half that again for any school age children but as several participants said: *"that's a lot of money when you haven't got much".* For Lucy money is even tighter since she has five children and is simultaneously experiencing the benefit cap and the two-child limit (Stewart et al., 2022) (See chapter three and section 7.3.1 for further details of these policies)

The next section will continue Lucy's story and discuss the lack of holistic and human centred policy approach within UC. It will also narrate the story of one person's direct encounter with the in-work progression policy.

7.3 Everyday experiences of Universal Credit in-work progression

7.3.1 Universal Credit experienced as one element of wider welfare reform – Lucy's story

Chapter five discussed how upstream policymakers largely did not think about UC within the wider policy landscape of economic austerity. UC was very much considered on its own by these policymakers, rather than as one element of wider welfare reforms. On the ground, however, families experienced UC in the context of other policy changes. Their benefit payment was called UC and although 'technically' their payments were reduced due to other welfare reforms such as the benefit cap, the two-child limit, or the benefit freeze, in claimants' minds UC was to blame for their financial struggles.

Since 2010, the welfare budget has reduced by over £30 billion through a combination of restricting eligibility and reduction in value (Reed, 2020). These cuts have predominantly fallen on working families and the largest impact has been among those in the lowest income groups (Bourquin et al, 2019). Women and single parents have been particularly affected (Trades Union Congress 2015; Tucker, 2017; Women's Budget Group, 2017; Lammasniemi, 2019). Lucy calculated that she has lost £700 a month largely due to the benefit cap policy. As explained in chapter three, the benefit cap was first introduced in 2012 and created an annual limit of total welfare benefits that a household could receive. At the time of the fieldwork this cap was set at £20,000 outside London. Furthermore, from April 2017, the two-child limit was introduced, which refuses some UC elements for any third or subsequent children born after April 2017 (with some exceptions). Parents like Lucy, who have more than two children, could avoid the cap by working more than 16 hours a week. However, in Lucy's case, the moment she works her way out of the reach of the cap, she will be subject to the two-child limit instead (See Stewart et al., 2022 for a full explanation of how these policies interact).

The reduction in benefits is intensely felt by Lucy and her children. She saves as much as she can by hunting around for the cheapest food and supplies. This means bungling the kids into pushchairs and walking 20 minutes over to the larger budget supermarket

where there are more bargains and cheaper food to be found. She talks proudly about her oldest son who is doing really well at school and how the teachers keep praising him. However, regular internet connection and access to computers doesn't come cheap and she wonders whether she can keep paying for this 'luxury'.

Philip Alston, who was the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in 2018, described these cuts to the welfare budget as 'punitive, mean-spirited and callous' and highlighted the harmful impact they would have on single parents in particular (Alston, 2018). Lucy feels a deep sense of injustice about these policies. She is aware of the need to find work to avoid the benefit cap. She was recently offered two job interviews as a care worker but did not have the £68 needed for the full DBS check required by the employer. Lucy would however really like to work. She has worked all her life and dreams about becoming a nurse. She has tried to seek small amounts of help from the Jobcentre but is told it is not Government policy to provide what employers should cover.

Lucy is only one of many low-income parents who struggled financially prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and who have been found to struggle even more after (Stewart, Patrick, and Reeves, 2023). Recent cost of living payments and other support are paid through the UC payment system in most cases. UC is therefore both a door opener for support and also the system that erodes this support through its interaction with wider reforms. The illustrates the need for more holistic policy analysis and design as advocated by the CA (Robeyns, 2017).

The next section looks at the experiences of in-work progression. It is illustrated through the story of Alison and her friend Andrea. Their backgrounds will be presented first before their policy experience is analysed in more detail.

7.3.2 Experience of Universal Credit in-work progression – Alison's story

One participant, Alison, had experienced the in-work progression policy and been told by the Jobcentre to find more work in order to comply with the required earnings threshold. Alison is in her late twenties. She is a single parent to two young children. One attends the nearby infant school and the other attends pre-school in the same location. Both the school and the pre-school are within a short walking distance from

Alison's warm and beautifully decorated house. On the particularly cold and wet November Tuesday that I meet her Alison would usually be at work. But one of her children is ill and asleep next to her on the sofa. So, Alison is combining childcare with a rare opportunity to catch up with her friend, Andrea, another single parent with one child who attends the same pre-school as Andrea's children. Andrea has not worked since having her child. She has recently come out of an abusive relationship and is currently piecing her life together. She would however like to look for work as soon as her child starts school.

Alison's mum turns up a little later with a bag of food and will stay the night so she can look after the children and get them to school so Alison can leave for work at 06.30 the next day. Alison now works shifts which means working anything from 07.00 in the morning to 7.30 at night. She feels lucky her mother can stay and help with the children. However, her mother would also like to go back to work but feels this is now impossible as she wants to support her daughter. Alison's mother is able to help because she does not currently need to claim UC. If she had her own CC she too would have been required to work or look for work 35 hours a week and she would not be able to help Alison given she lives two bus rides away in another part of town.

The reliance on local social networks to aid mothers find work is well documented in the literature (See for example Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Duncan and Edwards, 1996; Edin and Lein, 1997; Bell et. Al, 2005; Skinner, 2005; Crouter and Booth, 2014; Brady, 2016; Canton, 2016). Morgan (1996) emphasises the importance of local information, local ties and local networks when searching for formal, or informal, employment. Millar and Ridge (2009, 2013, 2020) describe a complex web of relationships and refer to employment for single parents as a 'family-work project' to emphasise that to achieve both paid work and care involves an intricate network of childcare and other support from family members or near friends. Results from their longitudinal study show that even with the help of immediate and extended family and friends most low-income families were unable to sustain work or progress from low-paid and insecure work over a fifteen-year period (Millar and Ridge 2020).

As shown above, Alison had indeed become a working parent with the help of her own mother illustrating the importance of grandparent care for working mothers (Kanji,

2018). However, despite currently working 16 hours a week she is being called into the jobcentre regularly.

"Every three months I have to go and see them. They know I'm in work but they are still saying I need to be looking for more work. One minute they're saying you don't need to look for work because you have two children then when I start working they say I have to look for more work!".

(Alison, single parent of two)

Alison's story illustrates when 'doing the right thing' is not enough and how the in-work progression policy clashes with a more relational and personal understanding of progression. It also illustrates the difficulty finding work to meet the progression earnings threshold.

"They basically told me to come out of work. They said I would either have to up my hours or leave but obviously having two children….[Pause]. It was just like a little office job, but it was like the perfect job! It was local….just a few hours a day. And it was like quite good money. I was on more than the minimum wage but then they penalise you for that because they take more off you the more you earn. So even if you got a better job you're no better off by getting that better job."

(Alison, single parent of two)

Alison, her friend Andrea and her mum are all very proud of the fact she is working and has done so continually from when her oldest child was a baby. She also escaped an abusive relationship and is adamant she wants to work and look after her children on her own. She compares her time on UC to a previous time of claiming tax-credits. She feels that the tax-credit system was rewarding, helping young single parents like her manage by topping up their low wages. However, she now feels punished despite the effort she is putting in.

"I was on tax credits before and I'm so much worse off now. By a long way. Tax credit was like a reward for working. You'd get your own wage and then you'd get a top up on that wage. They sort of topped it up to a full time wage basically. And then you'd get your childcare in that as well and you'd get it all in that one weekly payment. It's

definitely a deduction now. Because they take 60 pence[2] off for every pound you earn. I just think it should be good enough that I already work because a lot of people don't. They don't work. I have worked from my eldest son being like 5 months old when I went back to work so I've been working the whole time and then they kind of penalise you." (Alison, single parent of two)

People who are claiming welfare benefits, and whose circumstances have not changed were at the time of fieldwork still able to claim tax credits instead of UC. At the time of writing this is changing with more single parents being moved across to UC (DWP, 2023d). Those being moved by DWP will be entitled to transitional protection which is intended to protect the level of support and make nobody lose out by moving across. Such transitional protection was however not available for those moving to UC due to a change of circumstance, which applied to all of the participants in this study. Locally, parents naturally talk to each other, and several research participants compared their own situation on UC to other parents receiving tax credits. The feeling of tax credits being a reward and a motivation to work aligns with American studies (Sykes et. al. 2015).

"I feel with Universal Credit that there are different rules for different people. And as well my friend down the road she is on tax credits still and being on tax credits she gets so much more. You get a top-up on your wage rather being deducted for your earnings. She's £500 a month better off and she only has one child!"

(Alison, single parent of two)

These stories expose how the narrow policy goal of individual increases in earnings are disconnected from the complex relational lives of parents claiming UC. The interplay between work, care, social networks and time-space factors is evident in Alison's story above. This will be explored further below where the requirements demanded of the individual UC claimant is discussed as a constraining factor in creating capabilities for flourishing lives.

[2] at the time of fieldwork this was the UC deduction rate. This has since changed to 55 pence for every additional £1 earned above the UC standard allowance.

7.4 Everyday strategies for making paid work fit with care and family life

7.4.1 UC assumptions about family care roles – Joshua and Chloe's stories

The relationship between welfare policies, paid work and care is an important issue in many countries. Policies have been designed with varying degrees of state support for formal childcare in order to assist parents entering paid work whilst also ensuring children are cared for (Bonoli and Reber, 2010; Thevenon, 2011). Often these policies are rooted in understandings of family relationships that are based on assumptions about reciprocal commitments and the gendered nature of these assumptions has been challenged by feminist critics (Land, 2016).

Chapter two outlined how Amartya Sen developed the CA as a response to traditional economic theories and argued the need to go beyond the assessment of utility and income and instead adopt a broad view of preferences of what people value and the meaningful choices that they are able to make (Sen, 1985, 1999). Using the term "Gendered Moral Rationalities" Duncan and Edwards (1999) likewise question the economic rhetoric underpinning welfare policies and argue that "the model of rational economic man is that of a self-contained, uncontextualized and emotion-free individual agent whose actions are governed and calculated by the self-interested drive to maximize economic well-being for himself ….[and] ….households are seen as gender-free economic units that rationally allocate their differentiated labour (to paid work, household work, and so on) so as to maximize resources. Social relations, including gender relations, within and among households are viewed as unimportant" (p.199). More recently UC has been criticised for treating a household as if it was an individual, and in most cases a male individual (Bennett, 2012, Bennett and Sung, 2014). In UC couples have individual CCs but a joint UC award. Within the joint award conditionality is decided according to a 'lead worker' and 'lead carer' set-up. This has been found to be out of touch with how modern families share duties of paid work and care (Griffiths, 2020, 2022, Bennett, 2021). Some of these problems are illustrated below in the case

of two parents. One is Joshua, from the main fieldwork location in Oldham, the other, Chloe, lives in another part of the country which illustrates how this is not a specific place-based implementation issue (see also Griffiths 2020, 2022).

The problems with the UC policy assumptions about households, paid work and care is illustrated by Joshua, a post-graduate student in his late 20s. Joshua lives in one of the Oldham neighbourhoods and has an 18-month-old son who he looks after three times per week. Joshua is separated from his son's mother, and they live apart. Before his recent studies, Joshua had to claim UC. He was considered a single benefit claimant and subject to full conditionality. His CC stated he had to look for work or work 35 hours a week. However, because of his childcare responsibilities his work options are restricted to fewer hours. This, however, was not taken into account by the Jobcentre because he does not live with his son's mother. Another requirement was to attend weekly meetings with a work coach at the Jobcentre. At one such meeting he brought his son given the meeting took place on a day when he looks after him. Upon arrival at the jobcentre, he was challenged about bringing his son and was told he had to be job ready immediately. Joshua however had little choice as failure to turn up would have risked being sanctioned. Like Alison above, Joshua is trying to 'do the right thing' by balancing paid work and care. It appears the Jobcentre has done little to know and understand Joshua's particular circumstances. Perhaps that is why he talks about the Jobcentre with such anger and dislike and feels fathers like himself are unfairly treated by the benefits system – and by the Jobcentre workers:

"The welcome one gets in the Jobcentre, the first person you see, is the security guard. Sometimes a receptionist. They are all really stand-off'ish"

(Joshua, father of one)

In another part of the country a similar story occurs, illustrating how this is not an implementation issue but an issue rooted in UC design (Bennett, 2021). Chloe is one of two participants taking part in this research outside of the main Oldham fieldwork location (see chapter four for further discission about the sample). She is also considered single by UC and subject to full conditionality. She has a thirteen-year-old daughter who lives with her father in the same village where Chloe rents a small one bedroom flat and works behind the bar in the local working club on Fridays and

Sundays. Her working options are made more difficult because access to her daughter is affected by a difficult relationship with her ex-husband, who she describes as *"very controlling"*. So, in order not to lose contact with her daughter, Chloe goes to her ex-husband's house every day. There she takes the dog for walks and cleans the house in return for spending time with her daughter. She has tried to explain all of this to the Jobcentre but feels the lack of continuity of work coach support is unhelpful.

Actually, one day I was supposed to be seeing Chris, but then I saw a woman. So already I had seen three different people, and I saw Amanda last time. … I would like to have the same person, because from the beginning to now, then they know what's going on. But if you speak to different people each time you have to start again. And then you can get in a muddle and then they can pick up, you know, and say, no I think you are lying, or something like that." (Chloe, mother of one)

The stories of Joshua and Chloe illustrate how the Jobcentre, and its implementation of UC policy, can become a place of 'everyday indignities' (Johns, 2021). Because Joshua and Chloe's care responsibilities did not fit the policy assumptions, they risked being sanctioned for not meeting their conditionality requirements, despite doing similar activities to those of the policymakers who designed and deliver the policy. This disconnect between assumed everyday lives and the UC policy design may be rooted in the 'brave new world' culture of restricted voices and evidence choices that government policymakers reflected on in chapter five, and which will be discussed further in chapter nine.

In the next section Samantha's story sums up how several issues intersect. It shows how people value more than work, and how neither frontline staff nor the policy process, appear able to create conditions that enable 'whole person' progression.

7.4.2 Tailoring the Claimant Commitment – Samantha's story

Chapter three outlined the different UC conditionality groups and showed how parents with young children will automatically change group as their children grow older. The CC is supposed to be updated alongside these 'changes in circumstances' at which point parents will be faced with new and changing requirements to enter paid work or increase their earnings (DWP, 2023a). Samantha's story narrated below illustrate the

tension between personal circumstances on the one hand and the policy design and implementation on the other.

Samantha is a single parent with a two-year-old daughter. She has lived in Oldham for about two years after escaping a violent relationship in Manchester. There she used to work in the hospitality industry but stopped when she had her daughter due to long shifts that were incompatible with being a single parent. Samantha and I met on several occasions during fieldwork in 2017-18. Sometimes we met in a community café and sometimes we walked through the neighbourhood. Throughout several of our conversations, she talked about the Jobcentre with displeasure. She finds it an unwelcome, untidy and unsupportive environment which are sentiments she shares with other parents who describe the jobcentre as a particularly unfriendly place for children (Andersen, 2019).

As well as looking after her own daughter, Samantha keeps her hospitality skills up to date by volunteering in the community café several days a week. She also organises local baby, toddler and youth groups. On top of this she sometimes helps looking after her sister's son. Her sister is a support worker and lives about an hour away on public transport. In Oldham, at the time of fieldwork, the bus and tram networks did not accept the same ticket so the journey to visit her sister costs Samantha a minimum of £10 return. Neither Samantha nor her sister can rely on wider family for support. Their mother suffers from a severe illness and lives in a care home in another town in Greater Manchester. The disease is a genetic condition to which there is currently no cure. This illness carries a high risk of being passed on to children and Samantha knows she carries the gene. This is a big worry. At a clinic in Manchester, she gets help with how to cope. However, Samantha feels her work coach has little sympathy, and just keeps asking her to provide a fit note from her GP. However, this is not a situation that would normally warrant a fit note. Samantha is if anything suffering from fear of an almost inevitable illness more than being ill currently. In the place of a fit note Samantha has brought in letters from the hospital. However, the work coach response is to expect Samantha to attend meetings at the Jobcentre.

"They [meetings] are only about 5 minutes long. All she asks is for me to upload my CV. I tried to do it on my tablet – but for some reason it didn't work. So I took the tablet

with me to show her. She said it was a good CV. But I now have to go back there again on Friday. I have to do it. Otherwise I will be sanctioned"

(Samantha, single parent of one)

According to Samantha her work coach has limited understanding of her health problems but they know she is doing voluntary work and so far Samantha has not had to look for work. Soon however, when her daughter turns three she has been told her conditionality regime will change. She will then have to start looking for paid work. This will be a change both financially and emotionally.

*"So if I am in paid work the jobcentre will ignore the first £192 [S]**[3]

"Is that per week?" [I]

"I can't remember. I don't really dare to ask in the interview. I don't dare to ask why" [S]

What is stopping you asking? [I]

"It is the threat of sanctions really. Online it mentions X,Y,Z – all these things you have to do, otherwise you will be sanctioned"

For Samantha, as for many other of the participants in this research, the threat of sanctions is ever present and colours all interactions with frontline workers. These interviews took place prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and can therefore not expand on what others have found to be a change in tone experienced by some claimants during the pandemic (Scullion et al., 2022b). However, Samantha's story illustrates the mismatch between an intention for CCs to be tailored to individual needs (DWP, 2023a) and the everyday experiences of claimants. This mismatch fuels a level of mistrust between Samantha and her work coach:

"I just know she has no idea what I am going though. She doesn't understand this disease. I have proved to her I have this illness by showing her the hospital letters. My work coach she just doesn't get it. She is just cut from a different cloth"

(Samantha, single parent of one)

[3] The UC Standard Allowance has changed since this interview and is now £368.74 for a single person over 25 years

Chapter five discussed how broader individual and structural contexts were largely absent when government policymakers discussed the in-work progression policy. The void Samantha feels between her own life and that of her work coach's life and the sense of living in 'different worlds' will be discussed in chapter nine. The ability to exercise discretion on the frontline was discussed in chapter six. It showed how work coaches are constrained by increasing caseloads and lack of time and although some work coaches were able to take a holistic approach to UC implementation many were not. This can have serious consequences if sanctions are applied. Eleanor's story below illustrates the layers of complexities that lie underneath the surface.

7.4.3 Sanctioned for valuing care – Eleanor's story

Chapter five explained how government policymakers thought of conditionality as a labour market participation tool. The chapter furthermore showed how most of these policymakers did not believe there were local targets for sanctions. However, several studies have uncovered an increase in sanction rates that coincided with the introduction of UC (Webster, 2017; Adler, 2018; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018; Wright et.al, 2018; Wright and Dwyer, 2020). Eleanor's story is an example of the narrow policy goal of paid work that is propped up by a strict conditionality regime. It is also the story of policy implementation that has not considered layers of experience and family situations that make up someone's work-care strategies. Eleanor is in her late 30s. She lives with her partner and their six-year-old daughter in one of the fieldwork locations in Oldham. Her son from a previous relationship also lives with them. Her husband works evening shifts and Eleanor has recently started working in a large supermarket. Previously she had a stable job doing morning shifts as a cleaner for a local printer where her mother also works. She used to drive herself and her mother to work at 5.30 in the morning until she was made redundant after a short period of illness.

"I was on the sick cause I had an operation on my hand. So I was on the sick for 6 weeks. And when I were due to go back to work I got a letter saying I weren't to go in. So I received this letter and I had to go into this meeting and one of the managers had made false allegations against me. Saying that my work wasn't up to scratch. That before I was on the sick I didn't do my work properly. Which was a load of rubbish

cause if that was the case the supervisor would have pulled me in and said why haven't you done this. And they never did. He just didn't [Pause] *he didn't like me. I don't know why cause I hardly saw him. So we worked for a contract, a cleaning contract, my manager* [in the agency] *then found me another job at the College. Cleaning there. But it just didn't suit me. I weren't happy with it cause it was like an afternoon shift but I'd always fancied working a morning and it didn't suit me. So I left on my own terms and that's when they sanctioned me. Cause I walked out of my job. I was gutted really cause there was a lot of money that they took off me and I didn't get a lot to start with. They took like 300 pounds off me. Just because I walked out of that job. I felt it was wrong cause it is a lot of money. When you are waiting weeks to get your money then when you finally get it they sanction you. So then I got in a bit of a mess. Cause I had so much money taken off and then to find out that my rent hadn't been paid and I'd already paid all my bills and spent the money so it kind of got me behind with my rent. So it was a bit disheartening really."*

(Eleanor, couple parent of two)

The college job that Eleanor was offered by the cleaning agency was only a ten minutes drive away for Eleanor who owns a car. Otherwise, it would have taken considerably longer and would have involved two buses. Hence, neither the job role nor transport was the problem but the afternoon shift did not fit with the need to look after her six year old daughter.

"Cause I have always worked mornings. But there I was doing 2pm start to 6 pm. The thought of taking my daughter to school to come home and wait about to go to work to come home to do tea to go to bed it's just..like…….it didn't suit me. I weren't happy. And I'm not gonna go to a job where I weren't happy. You know, I wanna be happy in my job" (Eleanor, couple parent of two)

Eleanor's work coach appeared not to have consider what might lie underneath this layer of apparent voluntary job exit nor have investigated intersectional factors behind Eleanor's decision. As mentioned above, Eleanor gives her mother a lift to work to do 6am to 2pm shift and if she was to work in the afternoon this arrangement would have stopped. Because Eleanor's husband works evening shifts, he cannot pick up their daughter from school. With Eleanor changing her work from 2pm-6pm someone else

would need to provide childcare, most likely Eleanor's mother returning from her morning shift at 2pm. This was not a suitable arrangement for Eleanor:

"But then she's been to work all morning so then she would have to have [daughter] after that. She wouldn't see me struggling. But it wouldn't be fair on her"

(Eleanor, couple parent of two)

Deeper underneath the interlaced connections with work and extended family is another painful reason for why Eleanor is not able to place her daughter in before and after school care, and why the afternoon job at the college was not suitable: a tragedy of childhood illness that colours everyday life for this family.

"Oh yeah, there's before and after school clubs. Cheerleading. Choir. She won't do it now though. She used to. But not now. [Pause]…. *Not after her friend died. That's her there…..* [points to a picture on the mantleshelf]. *She died seven months ago. Of meningitis. My friend's little girl."* (Eleanor, couple parent of two)

Eleanor's story illustrates how emotional and everyday logistical jigsaw pieces must come together in order for the functioning of 'paid work' to be valuable. It illustrates a mismatch between a narrow policy goal and compliance driven policy implementation that appears to only value formal paid work and ignores unpaid care and family relationships. A common thread throughout this thesis is how all participants whether a policymaker, frontline worker or a UC claimant, all valued paid work in combination with other activities that are meaningful to them. Eleanor says it clearly: she wants to work but she wants to do a job that makes her happy. She also wants to care for her six-year-old daughter who has just lost her best friend. Moving towards a capability-enabling progression policy would require both policy designers and policy implementors to adopt more holistic approaches.

The next section will show some of the strategies low-income parents adopted in an attempt at finding this balance, looking specifically at how to balance paid work with childcare.

7.4.4 Strategies for combining work and childcare

Childcare is an important issue for enabling most parents to work and even more so for UC claimants (Griffiths et. al, 2020, 2022; Wood, 2021). In this research some parents worked different shifts to accommodate paid work and care, and others gave up well paid jobs because before and after school provision could not accommodate long days of work and commuting. Jackie is a single parent of one. She is one of the two pilot participants who lives in the South of England (see section 4.4.1 for a detailed sample discussion). Childcare was particularly difficult for her and affected both her work, progression and care strategies. When her daughter was younger and attended nursery, Jackie worked in a well-paid job as the manager of a children's home. That job involved travelling one hour each way and was only possible because of the nursery opening early and closing late:

"When my daughter was in a nursery, it was OK because I will drop her early at nursery, you know before 8, and travel for about an hour to go to work. And then come back home and pick her up at half past six".

(Jackie, single parent of one)

Once her daughter started school, she had to give up the job as the school breakfast club did not open early enough, nor did the after-school club close late enough to allow her time to travel to and from work. The absence of suitable school opening hours forced her to look for alternatives among private providers offering before and after school care. However, they are in high demand and costly. For her there would be no gain from working more even if she would have been able to secure a place for her daughter at any of these providers.

"Because you know what happens is that you work all these hours, right. Then all the money will go to the childcare provider. Then what's the point?"

(Jackie, single parent of one)

Jackie contrasted her position as a single parent with couple parents who had a potential second income to help pay for childcare. However, being a low-paid coupled family was not an easy solution either and Jackie talked about a neighbouring family where one parent was a taxi-driver and the other worked in a care setting which demanded overnight stay some nights a week. For Jackie this shift work and shift

parenting, depending on childminders for overnight childcare, was a step too far to accommodate work and family life and was seen to have potential detrimental effects on the children, as is discussed by Treanor and Troncoso (2022).

"I feel it is not good… especially for a two year old child. You know it's not safe.. it's missing that mother you know!" (Jackie, single mother of one)

(Jackie, single parent of one)

In Oldham suitable childcare provision was also very hard to come by. Many families with children live in the area and available good quality provision is scarce, reflecting the cuts to childcare provision caused by austerity policies (Webb and Bywaters, 2018).

"there's not a lot of childcare around here whatsoever. There's no nurseries. No private nursery. Just a couple of childminders dotted around that are literally full to the brim. There s' just no room." [Andrea, single parent of one]

Alison had tried a few. At first it was the Sure Start Centre which has since closed, along with up to 1000 other centres across the country since 2010 (Smith et. al. 2018). This childcare cull has removed vital support for local families (Torjesen, 2016). She then tried local childminders, before briefly trying a new provision which had hastily opened in an old pub, before finally finding better and more stable childcare as part of the local primary school. This was a particularly arduous effort tough as illustrated below.

"The Sure start centre closed down two years ago. My son used to go there. Then he went to a different nursery then he went to the childminder and now he's at pre-school. The other nursery was in the old pub on [name] road. That was an awful nursery it was. The kids could just get out on to the main road. They still had the old bar and pub toilets! Like they didn't have any small toilets for the kids. And he was only two. So they just had these two cubicles… And the bar was the reception. And the old snooker room was the administration. And it always smelled of old pub. It was a weird set-up [Laughs]! He now goes to the two and three year old unit attached to the [primary] *school but it is really difficult to get into. You have to fight for your space to get that. I only got it because my best friend's friend's mum is the deputy head there…..! So she knew my situation"*

(Alison, single parent of two)

"….and I only got a space there because of my social worker"

(Andrea, single parent of one)

For another parent in Oldham there was no childcare available, due to the times of day that they worked. Gina is a single parent with a three-year-old daughter. She grew up in the area and moved back after a period living in another nearby neighbourhood. For Gina having family relatively close by is not helping, as they are all working and not able to offer support. Gina works Tuesdays and Fridays, behind the bar at a sports club. Her shifts start at 7.30 in the evening, and she is contracted to work until midnight. But her hours vary, and she can work anything between 9 and 15 hours a week. She has a car and can safely get to and from work but because of lack of childcare, she takes her daughter with her, and puts her to sleep in the pushchair in the back room. Gina is acutely aware that this arrangement is not viable when her daughter starts school in the autumn, and she fears she will need to reduce the hours in this job.

"Because when she starts school full-time, I'm not going to be able to take her with me, and obviously you know getting her back home and … you know and then wanting … you know like getting up early as well for her to go to school, so I'm not going to be able to do Tuesdays. She doesn't wake up, but it's more the disturbing her and I want her to get into a proper routine you know for when she starts school full-time …" (Gina, single parent of one)

Gina has a long-term plan – which she has been working towards for a while. She attends evening classes once a week, when her boyfriend looks after her daughter. She aims to gain GCSE qualifications that will allow her to start a bookkeeping course and eventually get into bookkeeping as a career which is what she used to do before having her daughter. Although this time she would like to work more locally, for a smaller firm, in a part-time position.

"So I do a night class as well. So it's like I know what I want to do. I want to work in accounts again. I did GCSE English last year, Level 1 and 2 in both of them the year

before … So I'm doing my GCSE maths this year and hopefully in September I'll be able to do SAGE accounts and bookkeeping and that. That's the plan anyway!"

(Gina, single parent of one)

Several of the research participants in Oldham had started working after leaving school and were now keen to gain qualifications that would enhance further job opportunities, like Gina above. Their aim was to find a good local job compatible with childcare. But childcare was not just a barrier to work, it was also the biggest barrier to undertaking training because UC does not offer support for training fees and nor does it pause conditionality for anything less than full time education. Furthermore, childcare support is only available if parents are in paid work, not if they attend training or education or do voluntary or community work. This mismatch reduces the opportunity for parents to convert their (limited) financial resources into capability enhancing work.

"For the course that I would like to do I would need to get my starter kit, and childcare and transport. College helps you with childcare. But I would have to pay the course fees myself. So I would have to get a loan for that. Which is fine and I didn't mind doing that. It was at night time 6.30-9.30 every week so unless I relied on my mum there is no childcare available for that. Course was £3000 but you didn't start paying that back until you started earning a certain amount. I was accepted into the course but then I needed to pay £300 for a starter kit and I couldn't find a way to do it. They [Jobcentres] *don't promote you to go on to further education. Definitely not."*

(Alison, single parent of two)

Despite training and skills not being included in the policy definition of progression, the UC in-work progression policy is still considered the route to better jobs (McGregor-Smith, 2021). This is at odds with previous policy approaches that has emphasised progression as a combination of skills development, job retention and advancement (Walker and Kellard, 2001; Hendra et al., 2011). Furthermore Gray (2008) shows that in the US women who succeeded in leaving welfare programmes for a living wage job had done so through a combination of both formal financial support for job-training and informal assistance, such as financial and other support from family and friends.

The next section sums up how UC participants associated progression with wider reaching concepts of a good life.

7.4.5 Holistic understanding of progression

The previous chapters, and the personal stories above, have given testimony to a policy that appears disconnected from everyday lives. Its narrow focus on individual earnings growth is at odds with a holistic and broader concept among the low-income parents who valued more than just formal paid work.

"It [progression] *means like somebody has seen something in me and encouraged it. If had not been volunteering I would not have had the chance to build confidence and to get these opportunities* [help starting a college course]*. It is not like the Jobcentre is helping. They are just telling you to work 16 hours or get sanctioned. They are the ones that are supposed to help you. To make you go out of your comfort zone and make you do something that you wouldn't necessarily do. But they aren't doing that"*

(Samantha, single parent of one)

All the participants in this study, whether claiming UC or developing it, associated the term progression with more than the narrow goal of increased earnings. They all wanted to achieve a balance between paid work and other meaningful activities. For some, such activities were looking after children or caring for relatives. For others, volunteering in local initiatives was both a meaningful activity on its own, as well as a route into training or better paid work. However, the tension between volunteering activities and the UC requirement of looking for more paid work made it difficult to combine these activities. The mismatch of having to give up something that is of value with a paid job for minimal financial gain is summed up by Samantha:

"I would have to give up the community work if took on a paid job…. It would make me feel sad. It doesn't bother me in the slightest that I don't get paid. I have had more job satisfaction in the year I have been volunteering than I have in the past however many years I have worked in retail and just working for somebody else. And the jobcentre wouldn't see this community work as proper work. They want me to go out and earn money. They want me to go out and earn my wages. But I am doing more good now than I would if I were working in a Poundshop for an eight hour shift. But they don't see that. It is not valued. Because it doesn't involve money. Because I don't get paid for it. Cause they can't tick a little box that says she is working, because I won't fit the criteria of working. It is all about fitting certain criteria. Not about being an individual. If everyone around here had to go out and work there wouldn't be a community here.

Because if I have to go out and do paid work all the baby and toddler groups they wouldn't be here. And those group saved me. I didn't use to go out of the house before I started going to them." (Samantha, single parent of one)

For many, such as Samantha, UC is experienced as a punitive system and a good progression outcome would be to experience more generous support. When asked what they would like from UC if they could design the policy suggestions included low-cost support that would help them get local jobs or travel to better jobs nearby. This included free travelcards and help with accreditations needed in order to secure work such as DBS checks for working in the care sector or CICS cards for working in the building or construction sector.

The mismatch between what is valued by the policy and what is valued by people experiencing the policy will be discussed further in chapter 9.

7.5 Conclusions

This chapter has provided deep insights into the everyday experiences of low-income families on UC. It has analysed the enabling and constraining factors in their experiences of attempting to fulfil the UC conditionality requirements with a desire to also balance paid work with other activities that carry emotional value even if they do not lead to much financial gain.

The CA advocates for holistic and human centred approaches to policy. This chapter has demonstrated the need for policies to consider the impact of micro-level factors that in combination make up the holistic capability of 'progression'. The chapter has also explored how elements of the UC policy constrain people's freedom in different ways. Some of these elements relate to the narrow policy goal discussed in chapter two. Other elements relate to (lack of) holistic policy implementation. For low-income families both policy design and policy implementation therefore matter, as do spatial-temporal factors that are related to social, economic and environmental resources. The next and last empirical chapter looks in more detail at local labour market factors.

Policy elements that appear particularly relevant in order to enable a more capability-based progression policy are the availability and affordability of childcare, availability

of financial support to improve skills, consistency in tailoring of the CC and the ability of work coaches to 'pause' conditionality requirements. The chapter has demonstrated how people want the freedom to balance paid work with care and other activities that they value. They would like to make choices about working, how much to work and where to work, and in ways that fits with their local support networks. Through in-depth personal stories the chapter has illustrated that there are many and varied reasons for why people may not choose or be able to work as much as the UC policy demands.

This chapter shows how the UC policy design is insensitive to lives that do not always fit the stereotypical 'nuclear family'. This directly influences the ability of separated parents to combine paid work and childcare. The assumption is for one 'lead worker' and one 'lead carer' where the latter is more often assumed to be female (Griffith et al., 2020). This assumption does not sit well in families where parents may be separated, and both do childcare nor in couple families where parents jointly work and care.

Overall, parents want work to fit into their everyday lives, and they adopt a number of strategies in an attempt to make this happen. That means the need to fit together many 'jigsaw pieces' such as housing, transport, schools, nurseries, social networks and physical space. As set out in chapter two the CA invites us to study the combination of these elements in the context of what people value and how they are enabled or constrained in their efforts to live flourishing lives according to their values. This chapter has described how parents have been constrained by both UC policy design and policy implementation in their attempts to combine paid work, care and other meaningful activities in the places where they live. The policy assumptions about work and family life are furthermore shown to be disconnected from the reality of working in a local low-paid and precarious labour market. It shows how UC is experienced as 'punishment' whilst the tax-credit system was experienced as a 'reward' by topping up low-wages. This financial top-up was felt as a renumeration for 'doing the right thing' and parents in this study talked about how they felt valued similarly to other parents who can work part-time through having jobs with better pay and conditions. The latter group is exemplified by several of the policymakers described in chapter five who expressed similar values to the UC parents, especially the wish to combine work and care and to work locally in the place where they lived.

This chapter has illustrated the importance of broad-based informational policy frameworks. This means accounting for the goals that people value, desire and have reasons to pursue. It also means being mindful of policy processes as well as policy outcomes. The CA argues the need to go beyond the measure of utility and income and adopt a broad view of preference. The UC in-work progression policy appear to assume people lack motivation to undertake paid work. However, this study instead finds that people lack support to fit paid work with the rest of their lives. Chapter eight will discuss this policy mismatch in more detail and asks whether low-income parents subject to the in-work progression policy requirements will be 'better off in work' as advertised by the Government (DWP, 2010b).

8 Better off in work? Progression and well-being in Universal Credit

8.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the narrowness of the UC in-work progression policy in relation to people's well-being. The concept of well-being adopted aligns with the CA which sees well-being as people having the freedom to choose alternatives beyond individual income growth (Sen,1993, 1999). This chapter therefore continues the analysis of parents' experiences of 'life on UC' and how they try to achieve their ideal balance between paid work, unpaid work, care and other activities that have value to them. These everyday experiences are analysed alongside the policy assumptions expressed by the policymakers from chapter five. While the previous empirical chapters have looked at specific elements of the UC in-work progression policy in relation to whether they enable or restrict opportunities to build capabilities *to* work, this chapter looks at how the policy influences capabilities *through* work (Bueno, 2021).

Previous chapters have demonstrated how policymakers and UC families share values around balancing paid work with other activities. They showed that while policymakers were able to achieve a balance in their everyday lives this was unachievable for many UC families whose freedoms were restricted by UC policy elements, especially the conditionality rules which define claimants' available capabilities. The UC in-work progression policy excludes broader elements such as the quality of work and the availability of it in areas where people live. This chapter broadens the policy framework and discusses the meaning of 'good work' as it is understood by the upstream policymakers involved in the policy design, compared to how it is experienced by the research participants claiming UC. The UC in-work progression requirement is then analysed in the context of the local labour market opportunities in the fieldwork location of Oldham, Greater Manchester. As in previous chapters, this chapter underlines the enabling and restricting factors that characterise the experiences of policymakers and low-income families alike.

This chapter adds an additional form of policy mismatch to those discussed previously. Chapters five and six exposed the mismatch between policy design and assumed policy implementation, as well as a mismatch between conditionality, support and sanctions. This chapter discusses a mismatch between the assumption that earning more will create improved well-being for low-income families without considering the quality and availability of that work in places where people live.

The first part of this chapter will describe changes in the nature of work over the past two decades and the rise of in-work poverty in the UK. This will be followed by a discussion of how the UC in-work progression policy relates to this trend, and whether good quality jobs are part of the policy offer. What constitutes 'good work', whether people felt better off by working more, and how easy or difficult it is to find 'good work' is discussed thereafter. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of how progression is a multi-dimensional concept and how ignoring this oversimplifies and obscures people's individual needs and their real freedom to achieve their broader goals.

8.2 Poverty and the changing nature of work

8.2.1 In-work poverty

In the middle of the last decade UC was introduced to people across the country. At the time billboards advertised the policy across bus stops and train stations all over Greater Manchester, where many of the participants in this research lived. The billboards claimed you would 'always be better off in work' as the Coalition Government had proclaimed when taking office in 2010 (DWP, 2010a, 2010b). However, as the CA reminds us, being better off depends on a number of personal, social, economic, environmental and institutional factors (Sen, 1999) which the narrow goals in the UC in-work progression policy fails to acknowledge.

The UC in-work progression policy instead insists that more work is the route to progression and reduced poverty. However, the UK has a high overall employment rate and unemployment has stayed consistently low (ONS, 2023). In particular, the number of women engaged in paid work has continued to grow. In 1975 just over half (57%) of women of 'core working age' (aged 25-54) were working. By 2017 (when this fieldwork took place) this had risen to a record 78% (Roantree and Vira, 2018). Today,

three-quarters of women with dependent children are in work (ONS, 2021b). Despite this increased participation, poverty among families where at least one person is working has continued to increase despite decades of political promises to provide opportunities for all, improve communities and 'level up' the country (Ellison and Ellison, 2006; Lawless, 2012; OECD, 2015; Judge and Slaughter, 2020; McNeil et al. 2021; DLUHC, 2022). The figures above suggest that although participating in the formal labour market may reduce the risk of living in poverty it does not remove it, and women have been particularly hard hit by the combined effects of welfare cuts, increased conditionality in the benefit system, increased used of non-standard forms of work and are more likely to work in low-paid sectors (Hall et al., 2019; Judge and Slaughter, 2020; Beatty et al., 2021). Furthermore, women participate in the labour market differently compared to men. They are more likely to work part-time, in lower-paid jobs, and have fewer opportunities for advancement (ILO, 2019; Nicolaisen and Kavli, 2019; Seo, 2021). Many women already work multiple jobs, often combining low paid self-employment with low-paid jobs (Lawson, 2022). Women are therefore at higher risk of living in poverty despite being in work (JRF, 2016, 2023; WGB, 2019; McNeil et al., 2021).

In the UK there are around 3.7 million workers in low-paid and insecure work, with fluctuating hours or pay, involuntarily temporary work or low paid self-employment. This amounts to 12 per cent of the workforce (Living Wage Foundation, 2021). Furthermore, there are just under 6 million people in the UK paid below the living wage (Moore and Fiddes, 2019). Many of these are likely to be topping up their low wages and insecure work with UC. This was the case for more than half of the UC participants in this research whilst the other half were either full time carers, looking after children, doing voluntary work or too ill to do paid work (see annex 1 for a description of the research sample).

The likelihood of children growing up in poverty is determined by several factors, not least the cost of housing and the number of children in the family. These factors are affected by reduced financial support in UC compared to previous benefits and also impacts on the number of hours parents can work and whether one or both parents are in work (Stewart, Patrick and Reeves, 2023). Subsequently, single parent families are at particular risk of being in poverty having just one earner. For them the rhetoric of simply finding more work is particularly crude not having the option of sharing the

cost of housing, childcare and bills with another person. Rabindrakumar (2017) found that cuts in support both nationally and locally led to more debt and lack of employment opportunities among single parents after the 2012 welfare reforms were introduced. A decade later, single parents' employment aspirations are reduced further by lack of affordable and accessible childcare, lack of good quality flexible working opportunities, and poor matching of skills and jobs (Clery et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies have shown that single parents who have found work, and have become financially better off have achieved this through multiple avenues, not simply through working more hours (Edin and Lein, 1997; Gray, 2008; Millar and Ridge, 2009, 2013). Training, flexible working, childcare support, and help from family and friends are shown to be instrumental in these studies. The problem of in-work poverty is therefore complex. Having the opportunities to enter 'capability enhancing jobs' (Bueno, 2012) that provide financial stability and enables parents to exit poverty may go some way to bring about progression if it is addressed holistically.

8.2.2 Precarious work and Universal Credit

As outlined above, UC in-work progression is the main government policy for reducing in-work poverty (DWP, 2016, 2021). It falls into a dominant policy rhetoric over the past two decades stating that 'work is good for you' (DWP, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2015). However, the rise of in-work poverty has been coupled with an increase in precarious work and underemployment (JRF, 2016, 2023; Taylor, 2017; McGregor-Smith, 2021; Florisson, 2022) that is characterised by low pay, insufficient and variable hours, short-term contracts and limited social protection rights (Kalleberg, 2018; Rubery et al. 2018; Seo, 2021; Standing, 2021). This type of employment has been found not to make people better off (D'Arcy and Finch, 2017; Judge and Slaughter, 2020; TUC, 2021) and is often located in specific sectors that provide fewer employment benefits and higher work intensity with few routes to progress (Sissons et al., 2018). Forty per cent of UC claimants are in work (DWP, 2023) and many will be told to earn more in order to progress (DWP, 2022b). This will most likely be achieved by working more than one low-paid job simultaneously (Smith and Mc Bride, 2021; Lawson, 2022) which participants in this research did not associate with meaningful progression.

Most of the UC participants interviewed for this research were working in short-term or zero-hour contracts, in low-skilled or unskilled jobs. For them there was little option

of surviving solely on income from work and they therefore supplemented their low earnings with UC payments demonstrating a relationship between historically low levels of benefits (Hoynes, 2023) and the need to take any job, rather than having the freedom to find a job that fits with their skills and expertise or their ambitions and desires.

According to several participants, one of the largest local employers in Oldham employing in the region of 800 staff, had made people redundant from permanent contracts just to re-hire the same people on zero hours or short-term contracts through an agency. Caroline is a single parent of two teenage daughters who works for this employer. As a result of this contractual change she no longer knows when or how much to work from day to day or week to week, and to feels *"cheated"* out of a decent job.

"You have to ring them like seven o'clock and they'll tell you whether or not you're in today or the day after. I felt it was a bit cheeky because I would be getting paid less and I could get work one day and then the next day there could be nothing."

(Caroline, single parent of two)

According to Caroline only those in supervisory roles have been able to keep their permanent contracts. Everyone else must hope they do not fall ill or have to look after any children or older relatives, as there are no longer flexibilities to manage such life events. Despite UK workers in theory having the right to request flexible working, research by Mountney and Reid (2012) shows how managers of low-paid workers are often inflexible to such requests. Furthermore, Warren (2015) finds that many parents, both those in work and those unemployed, feel powerless in a climate of insecure and precarious work.

In Oldham nearly 30% of all jobs are in the public sector. Other employment opportunities are in retail, hospitality or social care. Warehousing and distribution employ a large number of people who work 12-hour shifts on low-pay and with weak terms and conditions (Williams, 2019). Many of the research participants talked about these warehousing jobs as opportunities that were always there but that they would only make use of when all other opportunities had been exhausted. These jobs were also seen as 'stop gaps' when incomes were low, and debts were high. In such cases the long nightshifts were often preferred, due to slightly higher wages and more hours.

One of the participants Gina, the single parent who combined work with evening classes whom we met in chapter seven, used to do such night shifts before she had her now three-year-old daughter:

"… I did do nights when I was pregnant. And I did a twelve-hour shift, so six at night till six in morning. But they didn't take that into consideration at all. So it's not in your work hours, so it's not our problem type thing, get on with it! I was quite healthy but obviously you know like, you know getting on towards the end of it, yeah my feet were aching and stuff. And they said, well, what can we do to help? I said, well a chair would be good … [laughs] (Gina, single parent of one)

UC appears to assume an ideal world where people can enter a part-time job and seamlessly gain additional hours or move to a better job and ultimately progress to a career – the so-called ABC of employment progression (Jones, 2022). As discussed in chapter three it also appears to be built on an assumption of regular monthly earnings whilst in reality pay fluctuations are the norm for most employees (D'Arcy and Finch, 2017; Tomlinson, 2018). This assumption creates difficulties when people's UC income is affected by (in)frequency of pay and having more than one salary fall within one UC assessment period (Tomlinson, 2018). Griffiths et al. (2022) show how unpredictable UC payments caused so much stress that some people left both work and UC altogether despite being financially worse off.

The issue of fluctuating earnings and incompatibility with the UC allowance was acutely felt by Gina who described UC as *"nothing but an absolute headache!"* Her UC allowance had been stopped every month and subsequently she had been ringing the UC helpline and visiting the Jobcentre with her payslips – usually speaking to a new person every time as also described by Chloe in chapter seven. In contrast to the political rhetoric of making UC 'like work' (Millar and Bennett, 2017), Gina wryly comments that *"if you go to a normal job, they don't just stop your wages or they don't just change your wages you know as and when they feel like it!"* This constant unpredictability has made her anxious about using her bank cards to pay for food and other things for herself and her daughter in case she exceeds her overdraft because her UC allowance has not been paid. Having to present her payslips every month not only adds extra work it has also removed any trust she might have had in the system.

Chapter two discussed how using the CA as a policy framework invites us to think holistically and measure more broadly the effects of policies. The rise of in-work poverty illustrates the demand for a more nuanced view. Many will argue that work is (still) the best strategy for reducing poverty given the low levels of benefits (Hoynes et al., 2023), but not in all circumstances and not for all types of jobs (Judge and Slaughter, 2020). People are more likely to escape in-work poverty if they can work full-time in a higher-paid job that provides permanency and predictability. The policymakers in this research fundamentally believed that work was a good thing for families, including for children. They believed that both parents should work, and that UC would help them do so. Ultimately, they believed there was enough flexibility in the UC conditionality rules to accommodate working and caring. However, these assumptions did not appear to be built on evidence. At the time of this research a couple with two children needed to work fifty hours a week earning the national minimum wage to escape poverty (Judge and Slaughter, 2020). Similarly, a single parent with two children needed to work 23 hours whilst a single parent with three children subject to the two-child limit typically needed to work more than full-time at 41 hours, earning the national minimum wage in order to exit poverty (Judge and Slaughter, 2020).

Despite research showing the detrimental effects on individuals and their families of transitioning in and out of precarious work and working several low-paid jobs simultaneously (Shildrick et al. 2012; Smith and McBride, 2021) one of the government policymakers thought that *"if we do it in a positive, thoughtful and enabling way, then it will be a really good thing".* This belief in policy delivery was less prominent among policymakers operating at the local or regional level. They were more aware of the precarity of the available jobs.

"For some of our customers, yeah, yeah, I think they have several jobs. As I say, just to make ends meet, or if the Jobcentre Plus says that they need other jobs because it links to the conditionality, then people do what they need to do in order to either avoid a benefit sanction or you know put food on the table. So, I personally don't think that there are enough full-time permanent positions available for people, which is why people turn to zero hours contracts and sign up to agencies".

(Policymaker 15, external organisation)

From the viewpoint of the UC claimants on the other hand the in-work progression policy requirement to “work first then work more” (Jones, 2022, p.254) did not meet their understanding of progression. They shared a desire with the policymakers in chapter five of having jobs that fitted with their skills and interests, and that could be combined with other parts of their lives. However, the narrow goal of increased earnings did not enable such ‘capabilities enhancing work’ (Bueno, 2021). To meet the requirements to earn more the main strategy for participants in this study was therefore to find another job on top of the job they already had. This would often be a cleaning job, or bar work or other low-paid positions in hospitality or retail. Working multiple jobs was something people thought they would have to do if it was required, but it was not valued:

“I’ve known a couple of people who’ve done that. I don’t think I would like to do that. I wouldn’t want to go to one job and then go home and go to another job. I don’t think I’d like that. I like to just go to the one job. Do my work and then come home. And that’s it. I don’t think I’d like to do that. It wouldn’t suit me that. I’ve already been to work. I’d just want to come home and chill. But if I had to there’s be nothing about it. But I wouldn’t like it. (Eleanor, couple parent, two children)

Some of the UC claimants interviewed already worked two jobs and could not fit in anymore. For people in this position progression would have been to have one job with decent pay accommodated with suitable childcare. Being able to combine paid work with childcare was more important than finding the right job, or even a good job, for all the parents in this study.

This is illustrated by Jackie, a single parent with a seven-year-old daughter who is one of the two pilot participants who lives in the south of England (see section 4.4.1 and 7.4.4). She works 17 hours a week over three days as a community organiser. On top of that she works as a personal health coach in the community 13 hours a week in the evenings. Because she owns a car, she can travel to her day job and between individual appointments quite easily, but because a lot of her work is in the evening she relies on friends and neighbours to help look after her daughter. She has no family nearby. Before she worked in the community, she used to be a freelance educational assessor. However, the unpredictability of the job, the need to travel far away to

assess students in their workplaces and the lack of job security meant she opted for a lower pay but more permanent job locally when she had her daughter. Finding work that she could combine with looking after her daughter was more important than finding the right job, or even a good job:

"If it pays good money and it cannot accommodate my childcare, I can't take it."

(Jackie, single mother of one)

In summary, this section has outlined how in-work poverty has grown over the last decade, fuelled by insecure and precarious work and combined with benefit cuts, stricter benefit rules and historically low levels of benefit payments (Hoynes et al., 2023). It has also shown that women, especially single parents, are more likely to struggle to escape in-work poverty through accessing more or better-paid work (Judge and Slaughter, 2020, Florisson and Gable, 2022, Clery et al., 2023). In addition, as the testimonies above illustrate escaping low-paid and insecure work is difficult when that is what is available where you live, or when you are dependent on work fitting in with childcare arrangements as described in more detail in the previous chapter (section 7.4.4).

The next section will look more closely at what constituted 'good work' for both policymakers and low-income families.

8.3 What is 'good work'?

This section builds on interviews with both policymakers and UC families. The focus is on paid work as the main source of income in combination with UC. It should be mentioned however that for UC families paid work was only one element of what constituted progression as discussed earlier in section 7.4.5. Unpaid work, whether care or volunteering, were at least as important in an ideal multi-dimensional progression concept.

The interview responses are analysed using the framework of the CA to address three dimensions of work: capabilities through work, capabilities in work and capabilities for work (Bueno, 2021, p.2). The distinction between capability enhancing and capability reducing work (Bueno, 2021. p.4; Senbruch, 2008, p.564) is not dissimilar to the

annual Good Work Index conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). CIPD describes 'good work' as giving people the financial means to securely making a living, allowing a balance between work and the rest of one's life, providing development opportunities and a sense of fulfilment, is physically and mentally healthy, and gives people a voice in shaping their work and working life (Brinkley, 2023). Williams et al. (2020) look at the quality of work across occupational structures. They find that most workers value a job they like doing and the nature of the work itself above levels of pay. Workers also characterise good work as jobs that utilise their skills, involve control and consist of varied tasks. However, such 'good work' is increasingly in short supply for lower-skilled and lower-paid workers in the UK (Taylor, 2017; ILO, 2019; Florisson and Gable, 2022).

The upstream policymakers largely did not mention the quality of work when talking about in-work progression. Instead, when asked what a good job was, they would talk about it in the context of their own work rather than in the context of UC policy. Their understanding of good work was having good terms and conditions, *"enjoying work"* and working with "*like-minded people"*. Although they valued having a good salary, they put more emphasis on qualitative measures such as using their skills, getting satisfaction from being intellectually challenged and working in a field they personally cared about. Furthermore, working in the public sector carried a higher value compared to the private sector (which was about *"chasing the money"*).

"It needs to be interesting. I enjoy tackling complex issues or difficult issues and coming up with solutions" (Policymaker 10, External Organisation)

"I think predominantly a good job makes good use of me, makes good use of my skills, my experiences, my aptitudes, my capabilities, my confidences, as well as potentially also stretching me in places where I might feel a bit weaker"

(Policymaker 7, Government)

The policymakers also emphasised emotive factors, such as *"being happy in my job"* and "*enjoying going to work every day"* as well as structural factors such as having access to flexible working and time autonomy which allowed them to fit their work into

their daily lives and their own work-care balance. This was particularly important for those with children:

"*I can work from home, I can work flexibly, so I can do long hours on one day, knowing that I can do the school run the next day"*

(Policymaker 3, Government)

"So I'll be leaving at about half past three today to get back to the school gates to pick up the kids. And there are times where I work from home, there are times where you know I might come in a bit later or leave a bit earlier."

(Policymaker 8, External Organisation)

Despite these reflections about their own understanding of 'good jobs' there was little reflection of whether such good jobs were available to UC claimants. In the context of UC, policymakers typically mentioned low-paid and insecure work – the narrow interest of UC policy - but few questioned how the policy could produce similar broader opportunities to their own. Importantly, one government policymaker specifically did not think job stability formed part of progression although *"it would feature in the collection of things that matter"*. Furthermore, very few policymakers mentioned access to training and education in their definition of in-work progression.

How UC families think about good jobs reflect values that are similar to those expressed by the policymakers above. Their goal was a steady job that could be combined with the rest of their lives, much like the jobs experienced by the policymakers. A good job was furthermore seen as being local and easy to combine with family responsibilities. Despite the lack of good pay in local jobs and the fact that all who worked were in low-paid jobs with little progression opportunities, pay did not feature heavily in conversation. This reflects Sen's argument that adaptive preferences make people internalise the difficulty of their circumstances and adapt to unfavourable situations (Sen, 1999).

The UC claimants that were in paid work did consider different roles as being better than others. Some work, for example in large supermarkets, did offer opportunities that were considered as better positions such as moving from being a 'picker' (whose job it is to select groceries for online orders) to work on the fresh food counter or at the check-out. However, this type of progression might not have 'counted' within the

automated UC system given that the pay would be similar, or the same and might not have brought individuals above the required earnings threshold.

"If I wanted I could better myself. Going for different jobs. And you know just not doing this job. I could do something else [in the supermarket]. *I could go on the check-outs or on the [specialist] counters. Management. I don't know if I'm confident enough to be a manager. One of the other ladies that work there she's gone to a different* [supermarket] *as a manager. So it can be done. But I'm happy where I am. I've got a job. This is the first step"*

(Eleanor, couple parent of two children)

Other UC claimants, like Andrea, Alison's friend from chapter seven, did not have a job and thought that when she was ready to work *"a job is the dream -not a dream job".* For most claimants available jobs would only offer the national minimum wage and was not seen to provide fulfilment. Claimants as well as one policymaker (external organisation) thought Jobcentre staff ignored the need to find fulfilling jobs:

"For my work coach a 'good job' is anything that can get you the hours. Anything that can reduce your benefit payments"

(Samantha, single parent of one)

"They [work coaches] will try and get people into any sort of work, whether that's zero hours contracts or unstable work and you know that's great for the Government figures and the unemployment's come down. And I suppose you could argue it's, even though the work's not stable, it's good to get people into the way of working and get them back into the world of work…… I think for us, you know it's great that people are in work but we want to try and make that work as stable as possible, so there's longevity and they're not having to return back to the Benefits system, which we know is fraught with conditionality and potential issues."

(Policymaker 15, External Organisation)

This section has outlined how policymakers and families share similar views about what characterises a good job. These views have many similarities to those outlined in the CA especially recognising that aspects of work other than income matters, for

example having fulfilling work (Sen, 1981, 1997b and 1999). However, the UC in-work progression policy largely ignores the quality of work and fails to acknowledge a link between employment and individual well-being. That will be the focus of the next section.

8.4 Feeling better off? Work and well-being

The centrality of 'work as the best form of welfare' was the policy focus throughout the 2000s and has continued to dominate welfare policies over the past decade. This policy focus advocates that one is 'always better off in work' (DWP, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2015). However, the potential harm of entering poor-quality work has largely been ignored and instead the focus on, and reach of, conditionality requirements have increased (Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Dwyer, 2019; Wright and Dwyer, 2020). This next section questions the policy assumption that you will always be better off in work and better off doing more work as advocated by the UC in-work progression policy. How people feel about working and how work impacts on people's well-being is the focus.

As discussed throughout this thesis the requirement to take any low-paid, short-term or agency job often conflicts with parental obligations such as childcare. This requirement is also associated with adverse physical and mental health conditions in response to increased stress, reduced control, increased conflict and fatigue (Campbell et.al. 2016; Wickham et al. 2020; Irvine and Rose, 2022). In addition, transitioning from unemployment into poor-quality work has been associated with poorer health outcomes than staying unemployed (Butterworth et al. 2011; Chandola and Chang, 2017). The question is therefore whether low-paid and precarious work, so dominant in many places in the UK (Beatty and Fothergill, 2020a; 2020b), makes people feel better off by doing more of it?

The CA approach advocates a diverse approach to policy development where policymakers go beyond income to understand people's lives (Sen, 1999; Stiglitz et al., 2010). Although Sen acknowledges income has a role to play, he argues that an individual's freedom to choose what is of value is conditional on multiple political, economic, social and environmental opportunities. Sen's approach to well-being is multidimension and he acknowledges that there are dimensions of well-being that is relevant to people that may not be captured by economic variables (Sen, 1993). The ability to combine work with other activities has been shown to increase people's well-

being (Bryson and MacKerron, 2017) which contrasts to the UC approach where 'any job' as outlined above trumps any other dimension.

Reduction in welfare payments on the other hand has been associated with poorer well-being, especially a reduction in mental health (Reeves et al., 2021). The reduction in financial means available through UC has been combined with UC administrative processes and requirements that has been found to cumulatively affect people's well-being negatively (Graven, 2021; Griffiths et al. 2021, 2022). Claiming and managing UC through a digital process, experiencing deductions and financial insecurity and having to comply with rigid rules have been particularly detrimental (Cheetham et al. 2019; Wickham et al. 2020; Pybus et. al. 2021). In this research none of the families felt better off on UC even in cases where they had limited conditionality rules imposed upon them. As their children grew older, they were however acutely aware that the Jobcentre would ask them to do more:

"That's another reason why I don't bother because I wouldn't be better off. I may as well wait until he is five and then look for a job. It just happens that I am going through a lot of personal stuff as well so…..but when he is five and I can get like a childminder and stuff like that I will". (Andrea, single parent of one)

The notion of feeling better off was multi-faceted. There was the straightforward financial calculation of earned income vs outgoings related to working, such as transport and childcare. Even if good quality childcare had been available it would be at a considerable cost, and all respondents tried to find work that fitted in with the government 'free childcare offer' of 15 hours a week. This was seen as preferable to the UC childcare offer of funding 85% of childcare costs up to a specified ceiling. Having to find the additional 15% caused problems for many in addition to the upfront cost and reimbursement system in place at the time of fieldwork (Wood, 2021).

"So even if I was going to get a childminder I would only be £45 a week better off on UC. So all my money would have to go to top up of that anyway. So I'd be no better off in work again for having to pay the childcare. I don't feel any better off!"

(Alison, single parent of two)

Whilst the UC families expressed frustrations and difficulties with the new system, some policymakers thought UC had largely succeeded in its aim of smoothing the transition between work and benefits. The overarching goal was seen to be incentivising people to take even short hours of work or work for only short periods (DWP, 2010b).

"I think actually UC helps, because one of the benefits of UC is that it uses RTI, which is real-time information, from HMRC. So unlike in the Housing Benefit regime, where if I was working three different jobs, I would have to evidence that via wage slips every time I got a wage slip in I'd have to take it down to the office or post it. But actually, the real-time information helps that and it kind of collates all of the income that an individual has had over a month, without the individual having to do anything, other than making sure their employer's signed up to HMRC, not paying them cash in hand! And then at the end of the month, everything's collated and they hopefully get what they're entitled to."

(Policymaker 9, Government)

However, as documented earlier in this thesis, people often did not get paid what they were entitled to, still had to verify their earnings by providing monthly payslips, and often experienced the RTI system as problematic and punitive. They felt it only emphasised paid work and thought UC ignored non-paid activities such as volunteering, unpaid community work and caring for children and relatives. Furthermore, the lack of full-time jobs was an issue and some policymakers did worry that conditionality rules would be the focus. If so, they feared low-paid part time work would hinder rather than help people:

"Yeah, so if you're working a sixteen-hour job, but you are able to work a full thirty-five hours, and the reason why you're not working a full thirty-five hours is because you haven't found a job that is thirty-five hours, or you've not found another part-time job that tops you up to the thirty-five hours per week. Yeah, then, as part of the conditionality you would be expected to look for work for the remaining nineteen hours of that work and find work. And if you're not working for the remaining nineteen hours, there's an expectation that you're doing work-related activities in order to try and find work. Whether those work-related activities actually convert into a position I don't know." (Policymaker 10, External Organisation)

Working several jobs also meant less time and opportunities to increase skills with the aim of getting a better job in the future.

"I think it's also harder for people to establish a CV behind them and to pick up various skills and experiences and competence if they are working kind of ten hours here and then six hours there and another eight hours in a different job and they're sort of in and out of different places."

(Policymaker 8, External Organisation)

This section has looked at the assumption of being 'better off in work'. The policy assumption is that earning more through working additional hours (whether in the current job or more likely in additional jobs) will increase people's well-being. This narrow view contrasts with the CA. According to Sen (1993), well-being is a multi-dimensional concept containing dimensions that is relevant to an individual. Policies should therefore adopt a more inclusive approach and capture wider influences of what matters to people's well-being (Robeyns, 2020).

The next section adopts a spatial lens to the concept of in-work progression and looks at the possibility of finding better jobs elsewhere for the UC families in this study.

8.5 Finding better work elsewhere? Place, space and transport

We have seen in earlier chapters that work is an important aspect of people's lives, but not necessarily the most important factor. The examples of daily lives described in chapter seven show how everyday activities require negotiating space and time. As Jarvis (2011) describe it, "many aspects of space, time, and the lifecourse intersect in relation to the multiplicity of demands that are experienced every day in the spheres of work, home, school family and leisure" (p.519). Everyday geography is in this thesis understood as ways people organise their everyday life and how organisation in time and place helps shape and inform individual's daily projects (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001). Spatial mismatch theories have related the location of jobs to where welfare claimants live and have resulted in numerous policies aimed at connecting people to jobs (Kain, 2004). Other studies show that lack of transport and infrastructure can be part of the problem but also that poor neighbourhoods in the UK have stayed poor for decades despite numerous infrastructure and neighbourhood initiatives (Lupton, 2003;

Rae et al., 2016). For many people the biggest change over the past two decades has been from being poor and unemployed to being poor and cycling in and out of low-skilled and low-paid work (Lupton, 2003; Shildrick et al., 2012).

There is a multidimensional relationship between time, space and family behaviour (Roy, Tubbs and Burton, 2004; Bell et al., 2005; Jarvis, 2005; Blaxland, 2013). Blumenberg (2004) advocates for policies that take account of where welfare recipients will look for work, how they will do their job search, and how they will move between home, work, and care supporting destinations. Skinner (2005) introduces the concept of 'coordination points' in her discussion of parental employment. Coordination points are defined as the time and place when the family's daily journeys have to be synchronised in order for it to function optimally as illustrated in Eleanor's story in chapter seven.

The current spatial framework plan of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA, 2019) has been criticised for failing to acknowledge an uneven spatial reality of jobs (Johnson et al., 2022). It is argued that the plan to cluster higher-skilled and better-paid jobs in central parts of the city and lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs in logistics, transport and retail jobs in peripheral areas will further cement inequalities (Martin, 2021). D'Arcy (2019) highlights this spatial unevenness and shows that a quarter of Oldham's workers are low paid.

The jobs that UC families in this research were doing were low paid and insecure jobs in retail, warehouses, and care. These jobs were available locally or in neighbouring areas. The prospect of getting a better job elsewhere was not high despite Central Manchester being within average commuter time at 30 minutes away on the bus (ONS, 2018). Several UC claimants had worked in Central Manchester before they had children. These jobs were typically in administrative roles and in the hospitality sector. Many thought back to that period as *"good times"* but could not see a way they could return to that life whilst also looking after their children. This was either because of long shifts that were incompatible with childcare, or because they did not see the benefit of working in an equally low-paid job in Central Manchester and having the added transport cost and time on top. There was also the feeling that missing out on children's development was worth more than working so many hours at such a low financial gain coupled with difficulty and cost of finding childcare:

"You'd still be struggling and then missing seeing your kids grow up for an extra £20 a month. And stressing getting to work and back. And if they are in school…. in the 6 weeks holidays then what do you do?" (Andrea, single parent of one)

The reluctance to travel to get a better job was not unique to the UC families. The policymakers in this study worked in cities across the UK and were equally unwilling to change jobs if they lost out financially or if the job was not of good enough quality. They valued staying in their local community and having a better work-life balance.

"So I think location in kind of a job search sense is massive, obviously I had my own perceptions of where I wanted to work and there would have come a time where I thought, well if I have to go and work in Manchester, I'll go and work in Manchester, but you know I wouldn't go and work in Manchester to work in a shop, I'd just about come to [own location] *to work in a shop, I wouldn't go any further. So location of jobs and job search horizons are massive issues"*

(Policymaker 12, External Organisation)

Despite some acknowledgement that local labour markets may not offer opportunities for UC claimants to work more, a majority of the policymakers defended the policy. One government policymaker believed there was a *"genuine demand to work more"* whilst also acknowledging that it would be counterproductive to be *"forcing them to have two part-time jobs that you know means they're sort of travelling for hours every day in order to do it"*. In general, the policymakers thought of the labour market as an abstract concept. Isolated from the everyday spatial context, simply as one factor to consider but never included holistically in policy development.

This lack of spatial concepts in welfare policymaking has been fuelled by the focus over decades to change individual behaviour rather than holistically tie together social processes across time and space. As this research shows employment fortunes are not determined by individual behaviour alone, rather it is linked to the fit between the place people live, their social and family networks and wider societal structures and demands.

8.6 Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how capabilities can be 'place-based' and as such are a subset of all capabilities that constitute someone's well-being (Robeyns, 2020). It has also shown that in-work progression and well-being are multi-faceted and dependent on individual and social circumstances as well as the characteristics of work itself. People's decisions about where, when and how much to work is based on a complicated jigsaw of many pieces and several factors. However, the UC in-work progression policy fails to account for this multi-dimensional geographical landscape and simply demands that people 'work more'. Progression is defined as 'earning enough' as determined by a monetary threshold automatically calculated by a system removed from the reality of people's everyday lives. This says the policy billboards, will make people 'better off'. However, as seen throughout this thesis few people claiming UC felt better off. In fact, many felt more stressed and more insecure after claiming UC than before.

Few would argue with the need to reduce in-work poverty which has risen to alarming levels throughout the past austerity decade (Beatty et al., 2021; McNeil et al., 2021; Florisson and Gable, 2022). However, listening to UC claimants in this study, the UC in-work progression policy is unlikely to provide the right solutions. The narrow policy measure fails to account for what really matters for people and fails to deliver the policy mechanisms to enable people's lives to flourish. Instead, the policy constrains people's agency and their capabilities.

The low-income parents in this study perceived UC as punishing them for valuing work and care. They did not feel better off on UC and did not think travelling further afield to find better work would help. They did not value simply 'earning more' when that meant increasing hours in insecure and low-paid jobs. They would have valued improving their skills and education in order to get a better job that interested them, but skills and training provision is not included in the UC in-work progression offer. There is no support for anything other than basic training and this tension between training and the benefit conditionality regime hinders people from expanding their horizons and skills (Gable, 2022). Thus, this policy does not offer routes into good work in many places and for many people. Instead, it risks increasing poverty for those already poor (Edmiston, 2021). Holistic progression was commonly seen as hampered

by policies that are too segmented and developed in silos. Understanding the ‘small everyday worlds’ of families (Ribbens McCarthy, 2014 p 329 cited in Jupp, 2017 p.269) can help counter an unhelpful binary policy rhetoric between ‘work’ and ‘welfare’ (Sage, 2019). Jupp (2017) argues that this binary policy approach treats families as individual units that are removed from the wider geographic structures in which they live and work and care.

Throughout the past two decades the dominant rhetoric, independent of political party, has been that ‘work is good for you’ (DWP, 2007; DWP, 2010; 2015). Absent from the political rhetoric is that although ‘good work’ might have both personal and societal benefits, ‘bad work’ - work that is insecure, offers little monetary reward, and little control, is not good for neither people nor places (Taylor, 2017; Williams et al., 2020; TUC, 2021, 2022; Florrisson, 2022). To genuinely provide progression and bring about greater well-being policymakers need to reconceptualise progression as a multi-dimensional concept that includes, but is not restricted to, financial gains through paid work. This requires both a broader definition, and measurements that counts the societal contribution of non-paid forms of work, care and leisure.

9 Conclusions

9.1 Overview

This thesis has adopted an interdisciplinary approach to examine the everyday geographies of the UC in-work progression welfare reform. The use of Amartya Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1985; 1988; 1999) allows for a novel contribution to the field of Geography and brings together elements from adjacent academic disciplines such as economics, philosophy and social policy. The CA lens has brought to the fore constraining and enabling factors influencing progression at spatial as well as institutional and individual levels. An important constraint that has emerged from this intersectional approach is austerity which presents itself both as a contextual frame and a relational presence that 'criss-crosses' people, places and policies. Hall (2019) describes austerity as a "personal and relational condition" (p.2) in the everyday lives of people in low-income neighbourhoods in the north of England. This thesis adds to the work of everyday geographies by identifying austerity as an 'omnipresent' but 'unspoken' factor in the policy process that also constraints the capabilities and professional lives of policymakers and frontline workers.

The everyday geographies of people being subjected to new welfare policy requirements are contrasted with the everyday geographies of those designing and implementing these reforms. This interdisciplinary perspective allows the thesis to highlight tensions and mismatches within and between policy concepts, as well as tensions between personal values and professions lives.

The thesis has particularly explored the extent to which the UC in-work progression policy reflects the experiences, values and beliefs of actors within three layers of the policymaking process: policy design, policy delivery and policy 'receipt'. It has applied the lens of the CA to analyse and describe how progression means different things to different people in different places. The thesis exposes the policy failure to incorporate the pluralism of people's lives, especially the absence of everyday geographic contexts and inability to accommodate individual circumstances and needs in order to balance resources and demands. It is based on qualitative interviews conducted with

fifteen policymakers and fifteen low-income parents with dependent children claiming UC, plus secondary analysis of interviews with twenty frontline Jobcentre Plus workers.

The thesis provides a timely addition to knowledge in three principal ways. Firstly, it argues the need for a holistic approach that puts human well-being and people's quality of life at the centre of policymaking. The thesis exposes how values about what makes a good quality life are shared by all participants in this research. However, the freedom to choose a way of life that realises these values is constrained in different ways for the three participant groups.

One of the main constraints is the narrow policy definition of 'progression' which highlights the second contribution. This is the importance of bringing pluralism into the policy process. This includes broadening the information base that policies are built upon as well as widening the outcomes and measures that determine policy success. The thesis demonstrates a need to incorporate how issues around working and working more feature in the totality of people's lives alongside other important aspects such as care, community activities, leisure and social relationships.

Thirdly, the thesis illustrates a disconnect between everyday spatial and temporal experiences of low-income parents and what the policy and policymakers assume these experiences to be. This exposes a deeper problem around what value welfare policies place on practices that are seen as worthwhile to people but are discarded in the policy narrative. It also exposes how abstract and centralised policies ignore the geographically and socially uneven nature of welfare policies.

The thesis makes an original contribution by examining values and agency across the whole policymaking process from 'upstream' policy design, via 'mid-stream' policy delivery to 'downstream' policy experience. In doing so, it fills a gap in knowledge regarding how different policy actors are enabled and constrained in different ways in their freedoms to act in accordance with their values and ideas of progression. This chapter summarises the implications and contributions of the findings highlighted in the thesis with reference to policy, theory and future research.

9.2 Implications for policy and theory

9.2.1 Human-centred and holistic approach to policymaking

The thesis has outlined how the CA allows for a holistic and nuanced understanding of what matters in people's lives. It consequently also outlines what is currently missing in the UC in-work progression policy. The CA sees each individual as the end and not the means to achieve well-being and a 'good life' (Sen, 1985, 1993; Nussbaum, 2000; Alkire, 2005). The thesis aligns the concept of 'progression' with the CA concepts of 'well-being' and 'quality of life'.

In accordance with the CA it adopts an interdisciplinary approach incorporating geographical, economic and social policy elements to expand knowledge. Fundamentally, the thesis outlines progression as multidimensional rather than a narrow concept of individual earnings growth. It uses experiences from actors across the policymaking process to argue the need for a multi-layered concept of progression that is anchored in a broad and diverse information base. Of central importance is information documenting how decisions are made about working or working more by different people in different places. The thesis has exposed how the narrow in-work progression policy aim is anchored in an equally narrow information base. This narrow goal of 'increased work' has emerged despite being understood and valued as a broad concept of 'work and other meaningful activities' at all three levels of policymaking - among those designing and determining the policy goals, among those implementing the policy and among those experiencing the policy in their everyday lives.

The thesis has discussed how values and ideas feature in policymaking as well as in everyday geographic lives. To better understand what really matters to people when it comes to working, working more, when and where to work, the thesis uses the CA to examine the extent to which the UC in-work progression policy enables or constraints 'real' or 'meaningful' progression, for example progression that enables people to have substantive freedom to choose a way of life that they value. The thesis argues that the UC in-work progression policy ignores factors that restrict people's capabilities at all three policy levels. Importantly, and contrary to its intention, the policy restricts people's ability to increase their earnings, if that is what they value, by not offering substantial opportunities to convert resources, such as money, time, skills and

relationships, into achieved functionings and capability sets, such as having a decent job, caring for children and relatives, taking part in community activities or having leisure time.

To really understand how people can achieve progression the policy needs to include other aspects of people's lives beyond earnings from formal paid work. The policy itself, and ultimately the policymakers developing and implementing the policy, need to take a holistic approach which asks how people's circumstances help or hinder them in creating a good life? Are they able to have a decent job? Are they able to protect their children from harm? Do they have some degree of choice in their life? In short, using the language of the CA the policy might want to ask what people are able to do or be in order to shape their lives in ways that are valuable to them. (Sen, 1985, 1993, 1999; Nussbaum 2000, 2011; Robeyns, 2002, 2006, 2017. A fundamental question asked in the thesis is therefore to what extent a new, human centred and holistic progression policy could better reflect what people value and have reason to value.

Although the CA focusses much attention on individual capabilities it also places importance of contextualism and collective capabilities (Robeyns, 2020). Sen argues for the need to understand what people value and aspire to as individuals, families and communities and believes "the translation of resources into the ability to do things vary substantially from person to person and community to community" (Sen, 1985:323). The conversion of resources into capability and functionings therefore needs personal, social, institutional and environmental conversion factors that are interlinked (Sen,1985, 1992). This thesis shows how resources have been reduced in all spheres through economic austerity policies adopted from 2010 onwards (Hall, 2016, 2019a, 2019b; Farnsworth and Irving, 2021). These reforms have shaped the local economic and social context in which UC was introduced and has led to increases in precarious and low-paid work, deep cuts to central and local government budgets and uneven geographical landscapes of inequality and poverty (Pimlott-Wilson and Hall, 2017, Gray and Barford, 2018, Hall, 2019a; 2019b; Jupp and Bowlby, 2019; Harrison, 2021 a; 2021b). That is the context which frames the everyday experiences of UC, the in-work progression element and accompanying welfare reforms which the thesis describes by narrating stories from people in two neighbourhoods in Oldham. These everyday stories highlight the mismatches

between an abstract and narrow policy and a relational and holistic everyday geographic life.

9.2.2 Pluralism in information base, policy goals and measures

The CA offers an alternative to the 'work first' activation focus of UC in-work progression. The narrow policy goal of increased individual earnings is underpinned by a belief that if people can just work more, they will achieve a better life, escape poverty and become 'independent of the state' (DWP, 2010a, 2010b, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2021). However, viewed through the lens of the CA, it becomes apparent that this policy ignores the fact that income is limited as an end in itself. Instead, it is one of the means, but not the only one, to achieve the goal of better quality of life. Sen and others argue for the need to broaden the base of information used in order to better explain and understand human behaviour (Stiglitz et. al, 2010). They argue the need for multiple metrics, or composite measures, that will be used to evaluate a measure of policy outcomes. The UC focus on increasing individual income is based in a dominant theoretical and political belief for economic growth which translates into government policies (HMT, 2023). Sen challenges the focus on growth in itself and the pursuit of self-interest within economic rational choice theory (Kleine, 2013). Although he does not reject economic growth, he believes human behaviour is driven by a range of motivations and argues for a "reasoned choice rather than a rational choice" (ibid. p. 23).

Furthermore, Sen argues for the variation in need and values as both subjective and objective outcomes (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2017). This leads to an argument for multi-dimensional policy measures that are based in household data aimed at capturing a range of both market and non-market-based activities as well as distributions of wealth, consumption and income (Stiglitz et al, 2010). The best-known example of multi-dimensional measures loosely based on the CA is the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). This was created to place people and their capabilities at the centre of measuring countries' development beyond economic growth alone. The HDI does this by combining economic, educational and health measures to capture different policy dimensions (UNDP, 1990). This intersectional approach to measure policy outcomes has since been used to also pursue policies for gender equality and environmental sustainability (Kleine, 2013).

The UC in-work progression measure of ‘increased earnings’ on the other hand is both narrow in scope and information base. It only considers earnings identified in the HMRC Real Time Information (RtI) system which does not include informal or self-employed earnings, nor any non-waged activities such as volunteering and caring. This limitation means the policy ignores the multitude of ways that people spend their time and earn a living. For example, studies have shown the prevalence of combining self-employment with formal waged employment (Lawson, 2022) whilst others outline how many low-income people do several jobs simultaneously (Smith and McBride (2021). The UC in-work progression policy ignores these multiple ways of working, and furthermore ignores the contribution of unwaged work impacting specifically on women (Andersen, 2023).

This thesis shows how care and community participation is valued highly in people’s lives. This exemplifies concerns outlined by Stiglitz et. al (2010) that measures based in market-based economic activities exclude various forms of productive activities, not least those that occur within the home. They argue such activities contribute just as much to individual and collective well-being as market-based income generating activities. Relatedly Dukelow (2022) argues that discussions about productivism and re-valuation of work and ‘productive’ use of time do not commonly include issues of welfare activation. This thesis helps fill that gap from a micro-perspective by looking at how agency, values and freedom to act in accordance with what one has reason to value differs among the research participants.

9.2.3 Lack of freedom to design and deliver a holistic progression policy

Chapters five, six and seven applied the CA as a framework for understanding policy design, policy delivery and policy experience. Yerkes et. al. (2019) argue the need to move from using the CA as an evaluative lens and instead focus on creating spaces for capability-based’ policies (p.148). Chapter 5 and 6 found that the ability for such capability-based policymaking is restrained by the lack of freedom for policymakers to create holistic policy aims and instruments that are aligned with their belief in a ‘whole person’ progression policy.

This thesis concurs with the view discuss by Robeyns (2017) that policymaking is not a value-neutral technocratic activity. Instead, policy formulation and implementation are shaped by individual and institutionally dominant cultures, values and ideas

(Béland and Cox, 2011; Béland, 2016). Chapter five described how policymakers were faced with institutional and political resistance to bring diverse voices and nuanced knowledge into the formulation of policy aims. This led policymakers to 'park' their own views and put aside critical thinking. Some policymakers felt compelled to take this approach in order to 'progress on and upwards' in their own careers and not limit themselves by challenging the 'office wisdom'. Others described how they would ideally like to take a more holistic approach to policymaking but felt constrained by a siloed and short-term policy focus as discussed by Slater (2022). Policymaker freedoms were furthermore curtailed by UC being designed and implemented during a period which has been described as a time of decreased consensual policymaking (Richardson, 2017).

This research allowed policymakers to reflect on progression in the relational context of their own lives as well as in abstract policy terms. In their own lives they viewed progression as more than just increased earnings. They thought progression in this context included having an interesting job, one that utilises their skills and knowledge and fits with their family commitments. However, as Yerkes et al. (2019) argue, the absence of a common language related to multi-dimensional and interdependent policy governance inhibit a capability-based framework to be used to its full potential by policymakers. This limitation occurred despite many of the policymakers seeing more holistic and nuanced approaches to policymaking as an ideal approach.

Whilst chapter five looked specifically at the translation of ideas and values in the process of formulating policies (Ingold and Monaghan, 2016) chapter six looked at specific implementation issues. The findings in chapter six are aligned with so called 'street level bureaucracy' studies which show that policies are often implemented in ways that diverge from the policy intent (Lipsky, 1980, 2010; Brodkin, 2013; Zacka, 2017). This chapter described how Jobcentre Plus workers often act according to their own values and beliefs, as well as their own interpretation of policy. What these frontline policymakers believed to be just, acceptable and realistic was more likely to be influenced by their own normative value judgements on the one hand and local rules and targets on the other, than by the stated policy aims.

The thesis demonstrates how frontline workers are indeed part of the overall policy process and how they through their actions shape and mediate policies (Lipsky, 2010;

Brodkin, 2013; van Berkel et al., 2018). Many ideally wanted to take a holistic approach and look at 'the whole person'. However, their ability to do so was restricted by contextual factors such as time, caseload size, local geography and a strong jobcentre compliance culture. The only progression 'support' they were able to offer to people already in-work, were more or less frequent conversations in the form of formal work search meetings underpinned by a strict benefit sanctions regime (Wright and Dwyer, 2020; Scullion, Jones and Wright, 2022, HMT 2023).

In theory frontline workers should have the ability to tailor the expected number of work hours. However, this discretionary ability was found to be inconsistently understood and applied. Hence, for policies to be capability-based these 'mid-stream' policymakers need the freedom to provide a service they value just as much as the 'upstream' policymakers need the freedom and agency to formulate holistic aims and outcomes.

9.2.4 Lack of freedom to choose work, care and other meaningful activities for low-income parents

As outlined above chapters five and six considered the CA as a framework for understanding policy design and delivery. Chapter seven completed the journey through the policy process and looked at everyday experiences of UC. The CA was used to analyse how UC, and in particular the in-work progression element, does not allow parents with children real freedom to act in accordance with their values and the things that matters to them. According to Sen the very basic thing that enable social change and progress is individual freedom (Sen, 1999). This freedom is seen as conditional on the political, economic, social and environmental opportunities people have. Of paramount importance to Sen is the opportunity for people to live long and healthy lives, in peace and free from fear and persecution (Sen, 1999). In Sen's view progress and growth would come from people gaining economic freedom. This would include the freedom to have a decent job in accordance with one's values (Alkire, 2005).

The thesis has shown that all participants, whether they were a policymaker or someone claiming UC, valued working. However, as chapter seven illustrates parents want work to fit into their everyday lives. Nobody valued work that eroded their freedom to also do other meaningful activities. Such unpaid activities included voluntary work

that helped filled the holes in local community support following austerity driven cuts to local governments. It also included taking part in neighbourhood activities and looking after children and other relatives.

Importantly decent work also expanded to working in locations and at times of day that fitted with transport and childcare/school arrangements. The thesis illustrates how parents adopted a number of strategies to make this happen. This meant fitting together many 'jigsaw pieces' – such as housing, transport, care, schools, nurseries, social networks and physical space. By taking a holistic, nuanced and person-centred approach the CA emphasises how freedoms of different kinds complement each other (Sen, 1999). This gives room to ultimately reflect on whether people are enabled or constrained in their efforts to live flourishing lives according to what they value and have reason to value.

UC policy aims are however deeply embedded in a 'work first' activation welfare philosophy. Parents described how they were constrained by the policy when attempting to combine work, care and other meaningful activities in the places where they live. The policy assumptions about work and family life are shown to be distant from the reality of working in a local low-paid and precarious labour market. In particular, people felt restrained by the narrow definition of 'progression'. They felt that increasing earnings, although desirable in many ways, would be too upsetting to carefully negotiated time and space arrangements.

Parents also felt that working more would not carry enough (financial) reward to compensate for the loss of time caring for children or other family members. Parents compared the stricter requirements under UC with their previous experiences of the HMRC administered tax-credit system. They thought the latter was a financial top-up that felt like a renumeration for 'doing the right thing' by working whilst also bringing up children – often on their own. The tax-credit 'bonus' made parents feel valued similarly to other parents who they believed could more easily combine work and care through better paid part-time jobs. Some of the policymakers in this research did indeed have the economic freedom to combine work and care, and to work locally in the place where they lived, exactly because of the terms and conditions of their job.

The accounts of low-income parents in this thesis illustrate how the UC in-work progression policy only value formal paid employment that is recognisable to the

frontline policymaker through a pre-defined earnings threshold (DWP, 2023). By focussing solely of earnings, the policy fails to see how different elements of the policy interact. As discussed above (9.2.2), a more complex measure could give (economic) value to the unpaid activities that people do by recognising them in people's CC. This would acknowledge the value of people's activities. Chapter seven also highlights the need for knowledge beyond the individual person. UC currently restrict the freedom of separated parents to combine work with care for children who do not live with them permanently through demanding full work search conditionality on these parents.

Sen places emphasis on how "a person's ability to achieve various valuable functionings may be greatly enhanced by public action or policy" (Sen, 1993, p.44). This thesis has described how the UC in-work progression policy does not enable low-income parents to achieve either a functioning of 'worker' nor 'carer' that is in accordance with their values. As a result, they do not have the capability to progress as they would like to. The thesis has shown how the policy fails to look deeper and wider at what makes for a good quality of life. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the thesis has shown the necessity to capture information about important 'goods' that are not always directly correlated with (increased) income.

9.2.5 Quality of work and everyday temporal and spatial realties are missing from the policy process

Chapter seven illustrated how parents' decisions about where, when and how much to work is based on a complicated jigsaw of many pieces and several actors. Chapter eight looks deeper at in-work progression as a solution to in-work poverty. It shows that the interaction between work and poverty is multi-faceted and dependent on individual and social circumstances as well as the characteristics of work itself. The UC in-work progression policy ignores this complicated everyday geographical landscape. Instead, it states people will escape poverty and be better off by earning more (DWP, 2023). However, as demonstrated throughout this thesis few people claiming UC felt better off. In fact, many felt more stressed and more insecure after claiming UC than before (Walton, 2018; Whickham et al., 2020).

Few would argue with the need to reduce in-work poverty which has risen to alarming levels throughout the past austerity decade and affect women particularly badly (Beatty et al., 2021; McNeil et al., 2021; Florisson and Gable, 2022). Poverty is by Sen

(1985, 1993, 1999) understood as the absence of the capability to do or be what one values. This is understood in an interdisciplinary and diverse way. Whilst poverty is often seen first and foremost as a problem of insufficient levels of income or wealth (JRF, 2023; Ray-Chaudhuri, 2023) the CA takes a broader view. The CA does not ignore levels of income or inequality of income and wealth but understands poverty as a deeper state of lacking the opportunity to experience economic and other freedoms (Sen, 1985, 1992; Alkire, 2002). Narrowing the problem to one of insufficient earnings limits the discussion of causes and solutions. By broadening the knowledge base policymakers would create the necessary wider and deeper understanding of the diverse processes and causes of poverty.

The parents in this study did not feel better off on UC and did not think travelling further afield to find more or better paid work would help. They did not value simply 'earning more' when that meant increasing hours in insecure and low-paid jobs. They would have valued improving their skills and education in order to get a better job that interested them, but UC does not support skills and training other than very basic provision. Furthermore, the tension between training and the benefit conditionality regime hinders people from expanding their educational horizons (Gable, 2022). Therefore, this policy does not offer routes into good work in many places and for many people instead risk increasing poverty for those already poor (Edmiston, 2021).

A more holistic policy for progression cannot ignore the temporal and spatial context in which the policy is experienced. Understanding the 'small everyday worlds' of families (Ribbens McCarthy, 2014 p 329 cited in Jupp, 2017 p.269) can help counter an unhelpful binary policy rhetoric between 'work' and 'welfare' (Sage, 2019). This binary and abstract policy approach appear to consider families as individual units removed from the wider geographic structures in which they live, work and care (Jupp, 2017). Pimlott-Wilson and Hall (2017) argue the need for "repositioning geographies' of children, youth and families at the centre rather than the periphery of discussions about the economy" (p.258). A more holistic approach that looks at household behaviour through the lens of the CA would reveal that decisions around work and work search ultimately depends on a balance of personal preferences and social and economic circumstances. Parents in this research aspired to more fulfilling jobs doing things that interested them. However, the jobs they expected to secure were mainly low-skilled and precarious, reflecting the types of jobs accessible locally, often via local

networks (Hanson and Pratt, 1991; Scott, London and Edin, 2000; Shildrick et al., 2012a, 2012b). This trade off reflects what Sen calls ‘adaptive preferences’ where individuals will adapt their desires and appear to be satisfied with their situation (Sen, 1985). The CA argues the need for policies to capture this constrained desire.

The narrow policy response is not only at odds with everyday geographic lives, but also at odds with the government’s own research showing that in-work progression requires a holistic policy response where pay-progression is just one element (DWP, 2020b). The research furthermore emphasises access to high quality employment as key to improving lives of low-paid people and underlines the need to provide a policy environment that ensures such access. The Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) furthermore insists on balancing policy expectations of required earnings or working hours with “an individual’s capabilities and constraints” (SSAC, 2019, p.43). SSAC furthermore emphasises the need for geographical considerations and the need for holistic knowledge about individual and contextual factors to form the basis for the policy design. Section 9.3 below will conclude this thesis with considerations for why such considerations have not become part of the in-work progression policy and look at possibilities for reducing this policy mismatch.

9.3 Can the capability approach help to reduce policy mismatch in the Universal Credit in-work progression policy?

9.3.1 Policy disconnect takes many forms

This thesis has explored how policymakers and low-income families share many similar values about work and life. It also shows how there is a mismatch, or disconnect, between the policy intent, its implementation, and everyday lives that are rooted in time and place. This disconnect takes several forms. Millar and Bennet (2017) argue that there is a “gap between the assumptions underlying the design of Universal Credit, on the one hand, and the research evidence about life on a low income, and in low-waged and often insecure employment, on the other” (p.1). For others the disconnect is even more deep rooted in the way welfare policies are based on ‘established wisdoms’ of short-term cost savings and narrow assumptions about human behaviour (Hignell, 2023).

For most of this thesis the CA has provided a normative framework for looking at the effects the UC in-work progression policy has on people's functionings and capabilities. When it comes to understanding the policy mismatch that runs throughout the thesis the CA also offers a useful framework for how the UC in-work progression policy could be better designed and delivered. The CA focuses on a broad understanding of quality of life and allows room for non-material aspects of life to be included in the policy process (Robeyns, 2017). The CA argues that a broader information base enables a better understanding of a problem as well as better solutions and measures. This concept in the CA incorporates people's agency and well-being and pays attention to pluralist policy processes and outcomes.

An example is the French Sarkozy commission which was set up to respond to concerns about a disconnect between what officials statistics measured and what people experienced in their everyday lives. Politicians and policymakers worried that political and technocratic beliefs and decisions based on inadequate data would lead to policies divorced from real life (Stiglitz et al., 2010 p xiv). The objective of the commission was therefore to align measures of well-being with "what actually contributes to quality of life" (ibid, p. xii) in the belief that this would steer policies and decisions in the direction of things that really matters to people.

In UC there has to date been little willingness to consider pluralism in information and measures. The policymaker accounts point to institutional cultures and practices dominated by narrow and established economic beliefs emphasising economic efficiency and maximising growth. They described lack of opportunities to bring alternative views and accounts into a policymaking process that was focussing all its efforts on just delivering 'something'.

External evidence as well as the government's own research have documented barriers and opportunities in people's efforts to combine work with other elements of their life (Bell et al., 2005; Ray et al., 2014; Rotik and Perry, 2011, DWP, 2017a; Millar and Ridge, 2013, 2020). This thesis provides policymaker accounts that suggest established evidence was never fully translated into the policy design. This has contributed to a disconnect that has grown within a policy that is continually evolving. As Neale (2021) states "policies that fail to account for change as a dynamic and fluid relational process situated in and across time risk generating a narrow, abstract and

partial understanding of how the policies work" (p.660). This in turn risk leading to unintended consequences and a "growing chasm between empirical evidence and policymaking" (ibid, p.664).

For parents this disconnect was particularly acute in relation to support provided for balancing work, family and community responsibilities. Another mismatch was found in terms of what type of activities were accepted as 'work' or 'work related activities' in the individual CC. Parents in this research discussed the absence of capabilities to work and do other meaningful activities. They felt their efforts to convert their time and resources into valuable capabilities were ignored or not even heard in the first place. Wright and Dwyer (2020) have looked specifically at how the in-work progression element of Universal Credit is experienced over time by low-income claimants. They argue that the context of increased conditionality and requirement to work more hours or take on additional jobs "produces a new coerced worker-claimant model of social support" (ibid. p1).

The CA believes that broadening the information base on which policies are built can create deeper and wider understandings of diverse processes and practices. This thesis argues that allowing a broader evidence base to be translated into the UC policy process can encourage a range of perspectives to emerge which has the potential to improve the policymaking process. For this to happen policymakers will need to question the end goal of the policy. The end goal should ultimately be to provide individuals with sufficient resource, and freedom to convert these resources, in ways they have reason to value within their ecological, economic and social spaces.

9.3.2 Expanding the voices heard in the policy process

The CA argues for diversity in life and diversity in voice. In doing so it emphasises how participatory approaches can contribute to policy development (Comim et al., 2008; Robeyns, 2017). Hearne and Murphy (2019) highlight how citizens can be empowered to 'raise their voices' in the policy process and thereby enhancing their individual and collective agency. As outlined above, the UC policy process has been dominated by an assumption that people make simple and rational financial choices about working or working more. The policy design is based on a belief that people will respond to modelled financial incentives that have produced a shifting landscape of financial 'winners and losers' (Finch and Gardiner, 2018). Furthermore, public sector policy

actors have been found to rely more on quantitative evidence which is seen as more likely to persuade decisionmakers about the viability and scalability of a policy or an idea (Bates et al., 2023). UC falls into a policy trend dominated by concepts of individuals and households without reference to how intra and inter-generational relationships shape everyday practices (Hall, 2016). By shifting the viewpoint to the perspectives of individuals and families embedded in everyday geographies and practices policies may facilitate what Yerkes et. al (2019) calls capability-based policies. Such policies focus on *human* development where economic development is part of the overall package but not the end goal in itself.

Welfare policies are often presented by governments or policymakers from the viewpoint of 'the economy' but less often from the viewpoint of the people the policies are trying to help. The need for jobseekers and other 'welfare recipients' to have a role in the design and implementation of employment policies has been highlighted by Orton (2011) who argues that including a diverse set of voices through the CA framework can add a "different conceptualization of the purpose and principles of public policy" (p.352). According to Bonvin and Farvaque (2005) a 'capability of voice' is "an individual's 'participation in the public process itself, and the effective possibility of expressing her concerns and wishes" (ibid. p 270).

Edgell and Graham (2017) use the CA to include the voices of young unemployed people when looking at welfare activation. They highlight a lack of policy space for young people to articulate capabilities, aspirations and values that do not include paid work. This thesis similarly found low-income parents to have a broader value set than the policy allowed. Importantly they wanted to be recognised as *peopl*e with characteristics and capabilities that are unique and should be valued and understood by the policy. As highlighted in this thesis a transition from doing some work into a position of having to do more work may rarely be a positive move into 'good work' - nor work that can match the value of the current balance between work and care.

The challenge of including more diverse voices into the policymaking process is related to the limited policy space for allowing normative assumptions about the value of unpaid as well as paid work. This thesis found that the current dominant values are difficult to question or challenge. A capability-based welfare policy based on the views

from a diverse set of voices would advocate for the right, but not the requirement, to work or work more in all circumstances (Dean et al. 2005; Jones 2022).

The thesis also found that the lack of diversity of voice in the UC policy development fuelled a sense of 'different world views' and a culture of mistrust. The low-income parents taking part in this research thought policymakers inhabited a different world to them. They felt policymakers based their policies upon how they themselves lived and that they lacked knowledge of how 'normal' people lived. In order to rectify this some participants thought policymakers should come and spend a day with them experiencing their struggles and constraints.

Although some policymakers did display both knowledge of, and empathy with, everyday struggles, one of the things they really valued in their job was to work with like-minded people. For many policymakers this meant working with people from privileged backgrounds located in London and other wealthier parts of the south-east. According to the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) nearly three out of four senior civil servants are from privileged backgrounds with just 18% coming from disadvantaged backgrounds (SMC, 2021). Additionally, those from higher socio-economic backgrounds are not only over-represented in the Civil Service as a whole, but specifically so in certain locations such as London, in certain departments such as the Treasury and in certain professions like policy development (ibid). In terms of setting the policy discourse and developing the policy rationale the SMC found that "emotional detachment and understated self-presentation are seen as the behavioural hallmarks of senior civil servants" (SMC, 2021 p.6). This contrasts somewhat with research that shows how narratives based on lived evidence and using story-telling techniques help influence policy actors by creating emotional connections (Crow and Jones, 2018; Bates et al. 2023). This is especially the case where the evidence comes from trusted sources or trusted individuals (Maybin, 2016).

The policymakers that did acknowledge the mismatch in world views thought it was based in the dominant policy approach of modelling winners and losers as outlined above. Other policymakers believed policy decisions were driven from top management levels with little regard to how it would 'land' on the ground. Political pressures and institutional environments are important factors in how impactful evidence is (Bates et. al, 2023). However, as Crow and Jones (2018) outline the ability

to emotionally connect through evidence narratives are also important. This thesis has shown a tension between different layers of policymakers, where the more mid-ranging civil servants thought senior policymakers did not fully engage with a deeper conversation about a range of evidence in the early days of UC development. Instead, policymakers thought senior managers placed more value on following their instincts about what the 'right' policy was.

9.4 Suggestions for future research

Several options for further research can be identified. This thesis has examined experiences from three viewpoints across the policy process on a small scale in relation to one element of the UC welfare reform. Combining all three vantage points is a relatively novel approach but importantly it is only one form of policy learning. Political and ideological factors have been shown to be of great importance in the agency of all three groups. Therefore, a suitable next step would be to consider the extent to which incorporating the shared values across all three groups displayed in this thesis would be politically and administratively feasible.

The first option would be to gather deeper insight into how the work-care balance for low-income parents is influenced by neighbourhood factors such as transport, local childcare provision and local employment opportunities. This thesis mainly looks at one location in one region of the country. To fully understand the interaction between individual, economic, social and spatial factors research would need to take place in different locations across the country. Such research would also need to look at tension between different welfare reforms and undertake cumulative analysis of policy effects.

The second option for future research would be to test the feasibility of multi-dimensional goals and outcome measures. This would allow a holistic view of policy problems. It would depend on the willingness to gather, or combine, existing data to feed into the policy design and implementation. Recognising that in-work poverty is a considerable problem in the UK one cannot ignore the need to increase people's financial resources. However, the thesis questions the narrow measures of progression that only considers formal paid earnings detectable through the HMRC RTI data system. Furthermore, current policy has been shown to lack spatial awareness and largely ignores geographical and place specific factors. One way of

broadening the measure would be to give value to unpaid activities and recognise these in the UC CC. This would need to be combined into a composite measure to make up a place-based UC quality of life and progression index. Such an index would need to contain elements that have value for people, such as training and education, physical and mental health, quality and decent employment opportunities in places where people claiming UC live.

Thirdly, analysis could be expanded to cross-national comparisons. Within the UK the devolved administrations of Scotland and Wales (and to a lesser degree Northern Ireland) have started to introduce different welfare policy elements emanating from different policy discourses (Birrell, 2009). An examination of how values and ideas have influenced policymakers in the devolved administration to come up with different policy instruments *within* the institutional structure of UC would allow deep learning about policymakers' freedom to act in accordance with their values within their devolved policy structures. One could expand this further to conduct comparative studies of welfare activation regimes in different countries, again looking across the 'upstream', 'mid-stream' and 'downstream' policy actors.

Finally, in order to address the issue of policy mismatch that has run throughout this thesis future research could explore whether co-producing policy with the people affected by the policy requirements would limit the amount of policy disconnect described here. Many academic disciplines have embraced various form of co-production or participatory research, whilst this approach is rare within policymaking. The benefits of co-producing research include developing a shared language and shared understanding that are rooted in everyday experiences. These would be the everyday experience of the policy 'recipient' as well as the everyday experience of the 'upstream' and 'mid-stream' policymaker. Acknowledging the different constraints described in this thesis any co-produced policy research would be wise to adopt a 'knowledge merger' approach (Bennett, 2021). Such an approach would recognise the validity of all voices, including a variety of processes of knowing and ways of creating and acting on knowledge (Mertens, 2007; Fine et al., 2021, Bandola-Gill et al., 2023). The CA would be a useful normative framework to combine with participatory and co-produced research. Both approaches emphasise the role of values and both approaches place people at the centre acknowledging the assets present in communities and people.

To conclude, this thesis has provided a first step in understanding how values and ideas influence the agency of actors across the policymaking process. It has demonstrated how these actors share values about balancing work, care and other meaningful activities and how their freedom to choose a way of life that achieves this balance is constrained in different ways. Policymakers are constrained in their freedom to design policy measures more aligned to their own achieved work-care balance. Frontline staff are constrained in delivering holistic support, and low-income parents are constrained in their freedom to choose how much, where and when to work whilst also combining work and other meaningful activities. This absence of their capabilities to do and be what they value is based in a narrow economic view where lack of (employment) progression is simply insufficient earnings. This view is shown to be geographically blind as well as failing to take account of all the other things that matters for having a good quality of life.

Annex 1. Research sample

People in receipt of Universal Credit

Pseudonym	Household type	Fieldwork location	Number of dependent children	Employment
Alison	Single parent	Oldham	2	Working p/t one job
Andrea	Single parent	Oldham	1	Not working
Eleanor	Couple parent	Oldham	2	Working f/t one job
Samantha	Single parent	Oldham	1	Volunteering f/t
Lucy	Couple parent	Oldham	5	In and out of work
Denise	Couple parent	Oldham	1	Not working. Caring for child and ill husband
Polly	Single parent	Oldham	3	Not working. Disability
Charlie	Single parent	Oldham	1	Not working. Volunteering p/t
Gina	Single parent	Oldham	1	Working p/t Studying evenings
Caroline	Single parent	Oldham	2	Working p/t
Jason	Single Parent	Oldham	1	F/T student
Jo and Tom	Couple	Oldham	1	Not working. Health problems
Kat and Jason	Couple parents	Oldham	2	Not working On-off temporary work
Jackie	Single parent	South of England	1	Working f/t two jobs
Chloe	Single parent	South of England	1	Working p/t one job

Policymakers

Number	Type of organisation	Interview method
1	Civil servant	Phone
2	Civil servant	Phone
3	Civil servant	In person
4	Civil servant	Phone
5	Civil servant	In person
6	Civil servant	In person
7	Civil servant	Phone
8	External organisation	Phone
9	Civil servant	Phone
10	External Organisation	Phone
11	External Organisation	Phone
12	External Organisation	In person
13	External organisation	Phone
14	External organisation	Phone
15	External organisation	In person

Anonymised interviews with Jobcentre Plus frontline workers:

10	work coaches
2	case managers
7	employment and partnership managers
1	Jobcentre senior leader

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