

We need a more flexible system to support people on low incomes

Low-paid, insecure jobs, inflexible systems, and benefit changes are pulling people into poverty – and that’s what you don’t see in TV shows like Skint Britain, says Tanya Lawson.

I live on Teesside, close to Stockton – where the second series of Benefits Street was filmed – and Hartlepool, which has just been featured in [Skint Britain: Friends Without Benefits](#).

These programmes are depicting the worst of our area. They’re not showing the likes of me, who are claiming Universal Credit but working hard, or people with illnesses that hold them back.

The only good one was The Mighty Redcar, which was also filmed in this area. It showed local people, young people, who wanted to work and there weren’t the jobs there. Most of the work around here is part-time, zero-hours contracts and there’s no security.

I’m a single mum, and I work three part-time jobs.

I don’t have my own transport, so although I have plantar fasciitis, which causes inflammation and pain in my feet, I walk to each of my jobs. I’m a dinner nanny at school, so I work there for an hour and 20 minutes, then walk home again, have just over an hour, and go back for 2.45pm to set up the hall for the after-school club, and work 3-6pm. I work contracted hours on Monday and Wednesday, but they vary on Tuesday and Thursday.

On a Friday, I come home, have my lunch, and walk half an hour to clean for an elderly gentleman. I’m his eyes and ears – I do some shopping for him, sometimes back for him, and keep him independent in his own home.

Universal Credit and work

I’m working, I’m doing everything right, everything that’s expected of me, and I feel like I’m being punished. The whole system that should help me is stacked against me.

It's taken me since September last year to pay off the debt I got into by going onto Universal Credit.

Last autumn, my wage was varying so much I had to take my pay slips into the council so they could adjust my rent and council tax. I applied for Universal Credit and did all the things I was asked to do, but the system doesn't allow for these variations.

My hours are affected by school holidays, so I never know how much I'll get from Universal Credit. That makes it so hard to manage money.

If I can get more hours, it means I get more money taken off me. One month, I got over £800, which is the highest I've ever got (in September I earned £205), and they took over £500 off me so I only got £22 in Universal Credit after waiting six weeks.

Restrictions and inflexibility

The whole benefits system is very black and white, and so one-size-fits-all – people's circumstances are very different.

The help available is not flexible enough if you are working three jobs like me. I'm very limited in the time I can do other things. If you don't have transport or time it's hard to access the help. On top of that, it doesn't take into account people's mental health issues.

I had some mental health problems myself. I had two rounds of counselling, took antidepressants for a year and needed two months off work. At the Jobcentre, I mentioned that the system was making me feel suicidal, but there doesn't seem to be any empathy at all – it's a case of "You've got to do this to get your money". You're not classed as an individual; you're classed as a number.

Every time I went I was getting upset and the manager was getting angry with me. The security guard kept watching me in case I did something. It's intimidating for someone who's already struggling with anxiety. The staff should be trained more in handling people with mental health issues.

"I have kept going"

I'm OK at the moment. Nothing's ever gone straightforwardly for me but I have kept going. It's not that I haven't tried different things but nothing's worked out for me.

I have had to access the food bank a couple of times but it's only open twice a week, 11am–2pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but I work in the middle of that time. By the time I can get there, it's almost time to close and they don't have much fresh food left.

My son got me a laptop so I can access Universal Credit and look for jobs. I never wanted a desk job so I never did typing at school – and they didn't have computers when I was at school. I can only type very slowly, one finger at a time, and it's very time-consuming trying to apply for work. I've tried to get on a course to help me with my computer skills but I was the only one who signed up and it got cancelled. Again, with limited time and no transport, my options are very restricted.

I would like to get my level 3 teaching assistant qualification but I can't move on because I'm tied to my hours with my three jobs.

I'm speaking out about this situation, along with others like [Thrive Teesside](#), because we need people to hear the truth about life on a low income – about the circumstances and systems that can lock us in poverty. We can't let these negative TV programmes speak on our behalf.