

Centre for Policy Research on
Men and Boys

**Purpose and Agency:
The Progressive Case
For Welfare Reform**

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Purpose and agency: the progressive case for welfare reform

The case to reform the UK's welfare bill has now become urgent. There are too many people trapped in its failing system. However, the case for welfare reform has too often hinged on punitive analysis of the 'work-shy', for whom the rest of society 'picks up the bill'. This default narrative stigmatises unemployed people as 'scroungers' - including those actively seeking work but unable to find it – and CPRMB rejects this penalising framing.

Instead, while recognising the need to redesign the £322.6 billion social security bill (DWP, 2026), CPRMB grounds its case for welfare reform on a positive footing. The welfare bill must be reformed around the human need for purpose in a way which encourages people into meaningful and suitable employment. The case for purpose and agency via meaningful employment is made extensively in philosophical tradition and development theory and remains grounded in empirical evidence. Yet governments of all persuasions have fought shy of explicitly recognising this. Before turning to the philosophical case for reform, the gravity of the problem must be recognised.

According to most recent data from the Department for Education, 13.3% of the population aged 16-24 are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) (DfE, 2026). This has risen from 11.2% in 2019 and indicates the growing number of economically inactive young people - more than one in eight. NEET levels are at a 14 year high (Brooks, 2026), and a greater percentage of young men (14% in 2025) are NEET than young women (12.7% in 2025) (DfE, 2026). This highlights how the rising unemployment and NEET status of young people is a phenomenon influenced by gender, and thus is an issue requiring a gender-sensitive lens. While it is worth recognising that around 55% of social security spending goes to pensioners, the rise in youth unemployment remains troubling when considering overall increases in social security spending over the last 10 years - from £210.8 billion in 2015/16 to £322.6 billion forecast for 2025/26 (DWP, 2026). And, according to the Milburn review, for every £1 the Department for Work and Pensions spends on getting employment support for young people, £25 is spent on young people's benefits (Milburn, 2026). If the number of NEETs continues to grow, this will soon pose a significant challenge – both at an individual and societal level. Welfare reform will inevitably have to respond to this fiscal reality.

Yet the most convincing arguments for welfare reform are not economic. Long-term viability provides the context, but not reasons for redesign. Instead, CPRMB draws its most persuasive case from a rich philosophical tradition that foregrounds the need for

belonging, identity and purpose. Within this tradition, Aristotle's 'eudaimonia' is central. Eudaimonia, "a good and fulfilling way of life" (Ryan and Martela, 2016), relies on intrinsic goals pursued via personal autonomy. Essentially, the highest and most virtuous way of living is achievable only via personal agency, used to achieve one's true capacity. In the employment sphere, this translates as purposeful employment offering a method through which to access the benevolence and satisfaction derived from working towards goals. In other words, work has the capacity to act as the vehicle towards Aristotle's eudaimonia. J.S. Mill's work *On Liberty* corroborates this idea; he argues that self-development unlocks inner liberty, and "he who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties" (Mill, 2015, p.296). This means that for Mill, personal freedom becomes realised by developing and improving the self by making choices and decisions. In terms of employment, the idea suggests that choosing 'good' work develops the self toward greater freedom. Taken together, the work of Mill and Aristotle argues that personal fulfilment and societal progress come from individuals making choices that lead toward goals. In the welfare and employment sphere, this underpins the argument that personal agency in choosing and taking on meaningful work, with a wider recognition of personal goals, will benefit society and its individuals.

A psychological perspective builds on this analysis. In 1943, Abraham Maslow developed a 'hierarchy of needs' (Maslow, 1943) – a pyramid of five human needs that must be met in ascending order. The hierarchy traced needs from the physiological to self-actualisation; drawing from the pyramid, employment is relevant at many of the levels. Beyond basic physiological needs, Maslow highlights safety needs as the next priority, which encompass regular employment, security, and predictability. The third level of need is 'love and belonging': needs that, drawing from Aristotle and Mill, are best met when choosing to work toward goals. Esteem from oneself and others is the fourth level of human need; this can again be tied extensively to employment and professional status, and can be gendered in its expression, especially when linked to male provider status (Hadar-Shoval et al., 2022). Maslow's highest level of need is 'self-actualisation', realising one's true potential, often via creativity. 'Self-actualisation' can also become intimately tied to career path, promotion and achievement in a desired field of one's choice. Overall, Maslow's hierarchy of needs demonstrates how intricately the ability to work is woven into the human psyche and its most basic needs. A redesigned welfare system that encourages and enables more people to choose meaningful, 'good' work is thus imperative.

Contemporary literature supports the idea that being able to choose and accept work is a fundamental right. Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen developed the idea that the denial of freedom is a form of poverty, and freedom should be measured in what people are actually able to be and do (Sen, 1999). Considering the current strict conditionality of social security benefits, often channeling people into low-wage and unsuitable work, current welfare arrangements clearly deny this agency. Reforms to

the welfare system must encourage people into and offer opportunities for non-exploitative, 'good' work – the kind of work which enables agency. Martha Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach' reinforces this view, arguing that because every individual is a moral end in themselves, they deserve a universal set of basic capabilities, which governments should set out to meet (Nussbaum, 2000). Within the ten capabilities she sets out is "control over one's environment", including being able to seek and accept work. Combined, the work of Sen and Nussbaum suggests that agency in seeking and choosing work is a vital right fundamental to human freedom. They frame humans as moral ends in themselves, deserving of agency and choice, which arguably, a reliance on the social security system prohibits. This poses significant questions for the UK's welfare arrangements: do they facilitate finding regular, meaningful employment? Do they channel vulnerable people into unsuitable work, or allow for individual choices and accommodations – for example, flexible work for both men and women around childcare? And could this be done better?

On the flip side, a rich evidence base also exists linking unemployment to poor mental health. Within this literature, reasons for poor mental health extend considerably further than just finances. The Health Foundation identified a positive correlation between unemployment and poor mental health due to stigma, reduced self-esteem and financial instability. In 2021, when surveying employed, furloughed and unemployed participants about their mental health, they found that 43% of unemployed participants had poor mental health. This was higher than the rates among furloughed participants (34%) and employed participants (27%) (Wilson and Finch, 2021). The UK Household Longitudinal Study extends this analysis, arguing that a high proportion of the mental health effects caused by unemployment are not explained by loss of income (which can be curbed somewhat by social security), but by the loss of a job (Thomson et al., 2023). This supports the analysis that employment takes on a role greater than solely financial in an individual's life. Coupled with the philosophical and psychological analysis, it can be used to argue that employment offers a sense of purpose, identity and belonging.

There is some data that suggests that the effects of unemployment are felt intensely by men. A meta-analysis of various studies in the Journal of Vocational Behavior by Paul and Moser found that men were 'more distressed' by unemployment than women (2009). Considering the tendency for traditional forms of masculinity to be linked to the 'breadwinner' and 'provider' status (Hadar-Shoval et al., 2022), this analysis holds some weight – where some men attribute self-worth to work and financial provision. Even if direct comparison between the effects of unemployment on men and women is difficult, it is reasonable to infer that due to differing gender expectations and norms, effects of unemployment will not be felt in the same way. Thus, when analysing the current welfare bill and its links with employment, a gender-specific lens is necessary.

Together, the philosophical, psychological, developmental and evidence-led analysis of t

the necessity of employment highlights the need for welfare reform. The current system offers neither adequate support for the unemployed, nor feasible paths into flexible and suitable employment – and thus fails on both counts. The result is high unemployment, particularly among young people and young men, which links closely with poor mental health in a concerning cycle.

The government must facilitate people finding ‘good’ and meaningful work by extending its existing Youth Guarantee, bolstering employment protections (for example, by banning zero-hours contracts), and expanding flexible working environments (for example, part-time or hybrid work). Social security should not force people into unsuitable work based on provision conditionality, and instead should enable people to choose quality, ‘good’ employment for themselves. But further than this, welfare reform must consider gender-differential outcomes when making these changes. For example, if more working-aged men than women who are long-term sick actively want a job (364,000 compared to 318,000) (ONS, 2026), why are there more male NEETs (14%) than female NEETs (12.7%)? On balance, men want to work, yet the high proportion of male NEETs suggests that employment opportunities on offer are not suitable or even accessible for young men. Welfare reform which engages with gender only on the surface or treats gender as an afterthought risks re-entrenching these differential outcomes. Recently, the Milburn (2026) report, which offered less than 200 words on gender, fell into this trap.

Basic human purpose and dignity are at stake in this debate and are so frequently lost to economic analysis. On the basis of belonging, motivation and purpose, we need a welfare system that enables access to positive, ‘good’ work, for both men and women. For many men work is purpose and purpose is work. Any welfare reform should start and end with this goal in mind.

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The logo consists of a white rectangular box with a teal border. Inside the box, the text "Centre for Policy Research on" is in a teal sans-serif font, and "Men and Boys" is in a larger, bold, teal sans-serif font.

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